

# The Benefits of Extensive Reading for Vietnamese EFL Learners



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This study aimed to explore the benefits of extensive reading on the development of Vietnamese EFL learners' reading fluency. The data were collected through an experiment conducted on university students who were following the usual English program for English majors. During the experiment, the treatment group read extensively and completed reading inventories for two months while the control group was given homework based on the reading materials they read in class. The results indicated that the extensive reading course helped the participants to increase their reading rate and facilitated their reading comprehension.

In my study on EFL learners' speed-reading training (Tran, 2012), I found that the participants initially read at around 115 words per minute (wpm) and comprehended around 59% of the text. Meanwhile, researchers have proposed that a reasonable two-part goal for second language learners who are reading materials with no new words should be around 250 wpm (Nation, 2005) for speed and 70% for comprehension, and that people reading in their first language would comprehend the best if their speed is around 300 wpm (Carver, 1982). Although linguists have claimed that reading speed in L2/FL is slower than in L1 (Fraser, 2007), those Vietnamese learners definitely needed to improve their reading rate. This study also found that speed reading helped the participants to significantly increase their reading rates and slightly improve their reading comprehension. However, I was struggling to plan lessons in ways that motivated them to read. A year ago, I came across Day

and Bamford's 2002 article in *Reading in a Foreign Language* and realized besides speed reading there are other methods that I can try to inspire my students to read. This experiment started from there.

## Literature Review

Reading fluency has been a major area of interest within the fields of language acquisition and language teaching. A considerable amount of literature has been published on this aspect of language performance, and there is a consensus that reading fluency is the ability to read and comprehend at the same time at an appropriate speed (Rasinski, et al., 2006; Samuels, 2006). For some researchers, fluency plays a role in developing readers' confidence and motivation in that if readers become more fluent, they tend to enjoy and spend more time reading, which in turn, helps them to develop additional fluency (Oakley, 2005). Similarly, Nuttall (1996) proposed a vicious circle for weak readers and a virtuous circle for good readers, as shown in Figure 1. The circles indicate that readers who understand better read faster, and thus enjoy reading more. Because they enjoy reading,

Tran, T. N. Y. (2018). The benefits of extensive reading for Vietnamese EFL learners *Extensive Reading World Congress Proceedings, 4*, 64-72.

they read more, which in turns, leads to better comprehension. For those reasons, developing reading fluency has become a common target of language programs in the past two decades. Linguists and language practitioners have focused on methods to help learners read faster and comprehend the text better. Among those studies that examined techniques for developing reading fluency, there is a growing body of research that looks at the effects of extensive reading on both L1 and EFL learners.

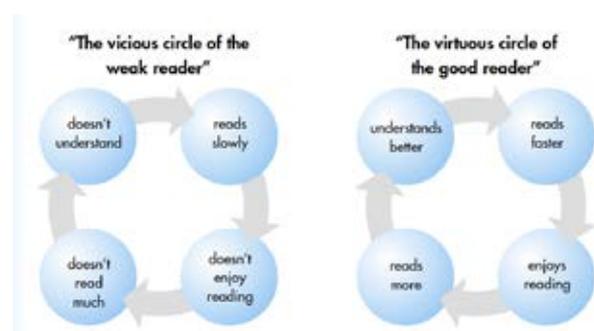


Figure 1. Nuttall's Circles of Weak and Good Readers (Nuttall, 1996).

Extensive reading is connected to other approaches such as pleasure reading, sustained silent reading, or uninterrupted sustained silent reading which have been in use for decades, but only recently has extensive reading come into its own, with a growing community of interested practitioners and researchers. It is an approach whereby learners read extensively to build their reading speed and comprehension. This kind of reading is different from intensive reading, which involves the teacher's in-class direct instruction, supervision and guidance.

Studies of extensive reading have showed the values of this program in language learning. Extensive reading programs have been proven to increase both reading rate and reading proficiency (Elley & Mangubhai, 1981; Robb & Susser, 1989; Cho &

Krashen, 1994). Grabe (2009) suggested that extensive reading is crucial for the automatization of the lower level skills of word recognition and parsing processes. Along similar lines, Wodinsky and Nation (1988) maintained that extensive reading materials, which are usually graded readers, contain a controlled, scaffolded grammatical and lexical load. Therefore, reading these materials will ensure sufficient repetition of new language items and help to consolidate previously learned language.

There is a consensus that while following an extensive reading program, learners get a lot more exposure to the language and there seems to be a transfer effect from reading competence to other language skills. Researchers have showed that extensive reading has a positive effect on learners' writing skills (Robb and Susser, 1989). Some other researchers found a correlation between reading extensively and oral fluency (Cho & Krashen, 1994) and listening proficiency (Elley & Mangubhai, 1981).

Past research has also found a link between extensive reading and the development of other language aspects. It has been suggested that by reading interesting stories, learners' vocabulary knowledge will be upgraded and they surpass a vocabulary threshold (Elley & Mangubhai, 1981). A correlation between incidental vocabulary acquisition and extensive reading was also reported by Pitts, White and Krashen (1989). According to Waring (2009), recent research has indicated that extensive reading is necessary in order for learners to gain control of word collocations and register. Some other researchers have revealed that extensive reading is beneficial for learners' grammatical development (Mason, 2006; Sheu, 2003).

According to several linguists, the fact that the reading materials are selected based on students' needs and interests guarantees students will enjoy the reading, which will motivate them to read more (Bell & Campbell, 1997). It seems that the more learners read, the higher their motivation rises (Wang & Guthrie, 2004). Some extensive reading programs have brought enjoyment to the learners and thus bring about positive attitudes toward English and language learning (Robb & Susser, 1989; Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, & Gorsuch, 2004). Extensive reading has also been said to build confidence with extended texts through reading longer texts and books, which are not used in classroom intensive reading (Kembo, 1993).

Past research has also paid attention to the principles of extensive reading. Day and Bamford (2002), for instance, listed ten features found in many successful ER programs: The reading material is easy; a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available; learners choose what they want to read; learners read as much as possible; the purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, and general understanding; reading is its own reward; reading speed is usually faster rather than slower; reading is individual and silent; teachers orient and guide their students; and the teacher is a role model of a reader.

However, there is no agreement on how much the reader has to/should read, but the most commonly suggested amount is a book a week at the students' fluent reading level (Nation & Wang, 1999). Complicating this is that there is no standard way of counting how much is read. Some researchers calculate the amount by pages, such as thirty pages an hour, three pages an hour, one page per day and three pages per day

during summer vacation, or at least 50 pages per week. Others have used minutes and hours as the measuring units, such as thirty minutes per day for five stories, poems or essays per week, an hour per evening, two hours per week of texts 10-20 pages in length, or 60 hours over 3 months. Some other researchers used reading speed as the measuring unit, arguing that readers should read at a rate of at least 200 words per minute (wpm) and up to 250 words or more (Hill, 1986).

Previous studies have also discussed issues relating to materials used for extensive reading. There is a common assumption that students will be reading graded readers. This is probably because students read graded readers within their fluent reading ability. Previous studies have utilized three types of graded readers: L1 materials, which were not written for pedagogic purposes; pedagogic readers, which were written for EFL learners; and adapted readers, which were adapted from authentic readers. Although a few researchers argued that the process of simplification may cause readers difficulties in comprehending the text due to the impairment of cohesion, coherence and discourse structure (Anderson & Armbruster, 1986), recent studies have shown that well-written graded readers can offer an authentic reading experience for learners (Claridge, 2005).

To date no studies in the Vietnamese context have investigated the benefits of extensive reading on Vietnamese EFL learners' reading fluency or language proficiency. In addition, very little is known about the effects of techniques and methods that aim to develop Vietnamese learners' reading rate and comprehension. This study seeks to obtain data which will help to address these issues.

## **Methodology**

The study was conducted in an EFL context that had never experienced extensive reading before. Most of the language teachers in the area had not even heard about extensive reading. Some of them might have met the term before but did not know what it actually means. The students also had not had any training in speed reading techniques prior to the experiment. They thus had no knowledge of what reading fluency means and what benefits reading fluency development might bring to their language learning process. The study set out to seek the answer to the research question as follows:

Does extensive reading help to improve EFL learners' reading speed and reading comprehension?

## **Participants**

The participants were a convenience sample of first year Vietnamese EFL learners from two intact English classes at a university in Vietnam. Their ages ranged from 19 to 21 and they had been studying English formally for 7 years at lower and upper secondary school. One class, which had 33 subjects, was randomly chosen to be the control group and the other, which had 35 subjects, was chosen to be the treatment group. All of the participants had passed the university examination, one component of which was a general English test at the pre-intermediate level. During the experiment time, both classes were following the usual English program at university. The program provided a total of ten hours of weekly instruction and consisted of five components: speaking, reading, listening, writing and grammar. The results from a questionnaire and interviews before the treatment time showed that none of the participants had previously experienced

extensive reading and none were taking extra English classes outside the usual program at university.

## **Materials**

The instruments used for the experiment included a general English test, two reading texts for the pre-test and post-test, a reading inventory template and stories.

The general English test was used to determine the participants' English proficiency and was adapted from a series of Cambridge Preliminary Tests of English Proficiency which contained two components: Listening and Reading. The original test had Speaking and Writing components but given that the main purpose was to assess the participants' receptive English skills rather than productive English skills, we omitted those test components for productive skills. The Reading component consisted of five parts with 25 questions and the Listening component had four parts and 25 questions.

Each of the reading texts for the pre-test and post-test contained about 700 words and was accompanied by 10 comprehension questions. The two texts were equal in terms of word number, number of words in the first 1000 word level, number of words in the second 1000 word level, and number of off-list words.

The stories/books used in this research were all available on the website <http://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/>. This website provides a free online collection of stories and poems. The 13 stories were grouped into Flesch-Kincaid Grade Levels. The various genres included texts covering genres such as history, essays, fables, fairy tales, folk tales, gothic, adventure, epic, fantasy, memoir, informational, satire, poem, realism, mystery, philosophy, romance, science fiction, speech,

and tragedy. Each chapter was accompanied by a section of student activities.

The reading inventory was designed for the treatment participants to use while following the extensive reading program. It included sections for the participants to record which stories/books they read and how much time they spent in total.

### ***Procedure***

Before the treatment, both groups were asked to take the general English test. This was to make sure the participants were at similar levels of English proficiency at the beginning of the experiment. The test lasted two hours and was administered by the researcher. After that, the participants sat the pre-test. Then, while both groups followed the English program at university, the experimental group followed the extensive reading program. The treatment lasted for 13 weeks. At the end of the treatment, both groups did the post-test.

The pre-test and post-test were administered in such a way that the students did not know that their reading rates were being measured. First, the researcher asked the students to read a text without regression and record the time they spent on reading it. Then, the researcher collected the texts from the students and gave them 10 comprehension questions to answer. Finally, the researcher read out the answer keys for peers to mark each other's work.

An interview was also conducted after the treatment group had finished the extensive reading program. In the interview, the participants were asked to talk about such issues as how much they had read per week, what they thought about the reading program, what difficulties they had had during the treatment, how much they had enjoyed reading before and

during the experiment, whether they were still reading the stories from the website or other sources, and so forth. This interview was carried out in Vietnamese to make sure the students could express their ideas and feelings.

During the treatment, after each reading lesson, the control group was given homework based on the reading materials they read in class. Meanwhile the experimental group were asked to read at least 20 pages per week, then fill in the reading inventory. The participants were English major students, so reading 20 pages a week was apparently not something too high for them to reach. However, they were also following six other courses at the same time as the experiment. Therefore, a minimum of 20 pages but not 30 or 40 was probably a more reasonable goal. Follow-up sessions were organized once every week so that the students could ask questions and share their experience. This was also to see whether the participants actually read the stories/books. Guidance and support were given to any student who seemed to need help. In those sessions, different activities were carried out, including information exchange, summarizing, report challenge, 4/3/2 review, life and story connection, picture-story correspondence and reordering.

### **Results and Discussion**

In order to measure the participants' reading speed, we used the words per minute method. The comprehension level was determined by the number of correct answers they made out of the ten comprehension questions accompanying the text.

Regarding the reading rate, the treatment group made a significantly higher average increase than the control group (see Table 1).

As can be seen from Table 1, before the treatment, the control group and the treatment group had similar average reading speed (112 wpm and 115 wpm). Note that they also had similar standard deviations. However, after the treatment, the experimental group significantly improved their reading speed. While the average reading rate for the control group was only 131 wpm, the average reading rate for the treatment group was 193 wpm. In other words, the control group made an increase of 19 wpm whereas the treatment group made an increase of 78 wpm.

To determine the nature of the interaction effect, a one way ANOVA compared the gain scores (pre-test to post-test) of the two groups. The results showed the mean scores of the two groups were significantly different,  $F(1, 133.64) = 65.29, p < 0.05$ . It can therefore be concluded that the treatment group outperformed the control readers in terms of reading speed.

In regard to the participants' reading comprehension level, it was found that both groups made slight increases (see Table 2).

The data indicated that the control group made an increase of 0.2 points while the treatment group made an increase of 0.4

points. Although the difference between the improvement scores for the two groups was not significant, this result is meaningful for reading instructors because it proves that an increase in speed does not have to be accompanied by a decrease in comprehension.

The results of the general English test indicated that both groups had similar scores, which means their English proficiency were equal before the treatment. This reinforces the reliability of the findings that the treatment group outperformed the control group thanks to the extensive reading program.

The interview with the treatment participants showed that most of them (29/35) read more than 20 pages a week. Ten out of 35 read more than 30 pages a week. Some students first thought it was impossible for them to read 20 pages in seven days but once they had started to read, sometimes they did not want to stop reading just because they loved the story. One difficulty they had during the program included the lack of time: Most of them had to do a lot of homework for other courses in the usual English program at university. Cross-cultural issues were also an obstacle that hindered the students' understanding of the

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Speeds on the Pre-test and the Post-test for Both Groups

Test		Control group	Treatment group
Pre-test	Mean	112	115
	SD	22.43	23.01
Post-test	Mean	131	193
	SD	21.54	22.62

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations of Comprehension Scores on the Pre-test and the Post-test for Both Groups

Test		Control group	Treatment group
Pre-test	Mean	6.3	6.2
	SD	1.48	1.33
Post-test	Mean	6.5	6.6
	SD	1.59	1.71

stories. More than half of the students said that they had no interest in reading English before the treatment and gradually fell into it after reading stories, especially the ones about history, adventure, and romance. More than two thirds of the group claimed that they were still reading English books and stories from the same website and even other sources at the time of interview (when the treatment was over).

All together, the results showed that the treatment group were reading at about 190 wpm, which shows they were reading extensively, and this might have helped the participants to develop their reading fluency. These findings corroborate with findings reported in several previous studies. One possible explanation for the increase in speed may be that reading for pleasure freed the participants from worries and stress about having to understand as much as possible for good grades, which allowed them to speed up. The habit of reading fast and not having to closely attend to every word in the text eventually resulted in an increase in reading speed. Another benefit of extensive reading is that it motivates the learners. Even for those who disliked reading at the beginning, extensive reading brought them so much joy that they continued to do it after the program ended.

## **Conclusion**

This study set out to examine the benefits of an extensive reading program on EFL learners. An experiment was carried out among first year English majors at a university in northern Vietnam. The two groups were completing an English program at the university, and the experimental group also did an extensive reading program.

The results indicated that the treatment group outperformed the control group in

terms of reading speed. There was a significant difference of 59 wpm between the average increases that the two groups made. After 13 weeks, the extensive reading group substantially improved their reading rate by 78 wpm. This is both statistically and pedagogically meaningful. It was also found that while increasing their reading rates, the treatment group did improve their comprehension although the difference was not significant. This is encouraging for reading instructors who are worried about the trade-off relationship between reading rate and comprehension.

The current study has, however, dealt with only the results from the pre-test and post-test. Analysis of the extensive reading process and progress was not conducted nor was any attempt made to determine how much the speed gains of the treatment group were retained after the experiment, or how much of it was transferred from the speed reading practice materials to their natural graded reading. A natural progression of this work would be to analyze the reading inventories that the participants wrote to see how much the participants read and if there was any correlation between how much they read and how much they enjoyed. Comparisons between the participants in the treatment group would also be a future topic for research.

To sum up, the findings of this research enrich our understanding of extensive reading as a method to develop EFL learners' reading fluency in this context. The fact that extensive reading has positive impacts on the participants' reading rate and comprehension could be inspiring to EFL teachers. Although caution must be applied when interpreting the results, the findings suggest a role for extensive reading in reading fluency development and reinforce the idea that reading speed

and reading comprehension can go hand in hand, and that it is possible to train EFL learners to read faster with appropriate methods.

## Acknowledgments

I'd like to thank Rob Waring, Notre Dame Seishin University for his ideas and advice. He's been an inspiring extensive reading expert and I believe what he has done will make a change to the reading in a foreign language culture in Vietnam.

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