

## THE EFFECTS OF EXTENSIVE READING ON EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION AND READING RATE

Tran Thi Ngoc Yen\*, Nguyen Thi Kim Anh, Nguyen Viet Hung  
Foreign Languages Department, Vinh University, Nghe An, Vietnam

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**\*Correspondence:**  
yenttn.vinhuni@gmail.com

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Extensive reading has been recognized as an alternative method to develop reading fluency. However, within the context of English language teaching in Vietnam, there has not been much research that examines the benefits of this method for university students. This study explores the effects of extensive reading on EFL university students' reading comprehension and reading rate. The data were collected through an experiment conducted over 15 weeks. The participants were students following English programs at a university in Vietnam. Five intact classes were randomly assigned to be the control group, and four other intact classes were randomly assigned to be the treatment group. A pre-test and a post-test were used to measure the participants' reading fluency improvement. During the experiment, the treatment group engaged in approximately 100 minutes of extensive reading weekly, using English stories suitable to their vocabulary levels, while the control group were given intensive reading activities. The results revealed significant reading comprehension and rate increases among the treatment group. The findings have highlighted the benefits of integrating extensive reading into English language teaching curricula and emphasized the importance for educators and students to recognize its role in enhancing English language learning.

**Keywords:** Extensive reading; reading comprehension; reading rate; EFL reading fluency.

### 1. Introduction

The ability to comprehend texts while maintaining an appropriate reading rate is valuable not only for academic achievement but also for real-world communication (Renandya and Jacobs, 2016). Reading comprehension and reading rate are fundamental to language proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Learners with better reading skills usually have more chances to attain higher abilities in other language aspects. However, many language teachers have struggled to find effective ways to help their learners develop reading fluency. Extensive Reading (ER), an approach that encourages students to

read large amounts of accessible text for general understanding, has gained recognition for its potential to enhance reading speed and comprehension. By allowing students to engage with language in a meaningful and enjoyable way, ER promotes vocabulary acquisition, syntactic awareness, and fluency in reading. Intensive reading strategies are often prioritized in the context of EFL teaching and learning in Vietnam, where educational practices emphasize accuracy and grammatical knowledge. Therefore, research on ER's application has remained limited.

This study explores ER's impacts on reading comprehension and reading rate among Vietnamese university students. It seeks to determine whether ER can complement traditional reading practices, fostering a more balanced language learning approach that values fluency and accuracy. The insights gained from this research could inform teaching practices in Vietnam, offering an alternative to conventional reading methods in a test-oriented educational system.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Reading fluency**

Reading fluency is generally defined as the ability to read texts with speed, accuracy, and appropriate comprehension (Kuhn and Stahl, 2003; Grabe, 2009; Nation, 2005; Rasinski, Blachowicz, and Lems, 2006; Gorsuch and Taguchi, 2008; Yamashita and Ichikawa, 2010). The importance of reading fluency is well documented in previous research. For example, Tran and Nation (2014) found that reading fluency development positively correlates with language memory span. Similarly, Renandya and Jacobs (2016) emphasize that fluency enhances learners' capacity to comprehend complex texts and to acquire vocabulary and grammatical structures through reading. Likewise, Iwata (2022) highlights that as students' reading fluency develops, they build a more extensive sight vocabulary, supporting faster and more efficient reading.

Reading comprehension and reading rate are the two primary indicators of reading fluency (Gorsuch and Taguchi, 2008; Yamashita and Ichikawa, 2010; Macalister, 2010; Tran, 2018). Reading comprehension refers to understanding and interpreting text, whereas reading rate measures the speed at which written content is processed (Suk, 2016). Reading comprehension is conventionally assessed using true-false questions, multiple-choice questions, short answer questions, and recall tests (Alderson, 1990; Gorsuch and Taguchi, 2008; Iwahori, 2008; Macalister, 2010). Previous research has suggested a goal of at least 70% comprehension in foreign language reading (Millett, Quinn and Nation, 2007; Tran and Nation, 2014).

Some researchers have measured reading speed by calculating words per minute (wpm) (Iwahori, 2008; Macalister, 2010; Tran and Nation, 2014). Some have also claimed that a reasonable speed for first-language reading is 300 wpm (Carver, 1982). However, other researchers believe that reading speed in foreign languages is slower than in native languages (Droop and Verhoeven, 2003; Fraser, 2007). Likewise, Nation (2005) suggests a suitable goal for foreign language learners is around 250 wpm. Previous studies in Vietnam have shown that EFL Vietnamese learners usually read at a speed too low to be considered fluent readers. For example, Tran and Nation (2014) found that university students read English texts at approximately 115 wpm and comprehended around 59% of

the text. This unsatisfactory reading fluency level may result in low academic achievement, as reading plays a crucial role in academic life. Therefore, English language teachers in Vietnam should find methods to help their learners improve reading fluency.

## ***2.2. Extensive reading***

ER is an instructional method involving learners reading large amounts of material they can comprehend without extensive teacher guidance. ER is generally defined as reading for enjoyment and general comprehension rather than detailed analysis. It allows learners to engage with texts freely and at their own pace (Day and Bamford, 1998; Waring, 2009). This approach encourages reading material that matches students' language proficiency levels, fostering a positive reading experience through exposure to high-interest content and minimal unfamiliar vocabulary. Therefore, it is also known as pleasure reading, sustained silent reading, or uninterrupted sustained silent reading (Tran, 2016).

Day and Bamford (2002) outlined the core principles of ER, highlighting the importance of easy access to diverse and easily understandable reading materials, where learners can freely choose what they want to read. The teacher should ensure students understand their reading for enjoyment and general understanding rather than for detailed analysis. Furthermore, they should be encouraged to read faster to build fluency naturally without pressure, as reading should be a pleasurable activity with no immediate reward other than the joy of reading itself. Reading should be done individually and silently since this enables personal engagement and immersion. Finally, in ER programs, teachers should be supportive, guiding students in selecting appropriate materials while modelling as enthusiastic readers. Other researchers have also agreed that if these principles are met, learners will have opportunities to engage in a practical reading environment where they can read more frequently, thus developing fluency through sustained practice.

The impact of ER on language development, particularly reading fluency, has been extensively demonstrated. For example, Nakanishi (2014), in a comprehensive meta-analysis, showed that ER significantly improves reading comprehension and reading speed, with long-term benefits for language acquisition. Similarly, Beglar, Hunt, and Kite (2011) found that Japanese EFL students who participated in pleasure reading activities notably improved their reading rates. This emphasizes the value of ER in building fluency. Other linguists have shown that ER facilitates gains in reading comprehension, reading rate (Waring, 2009; Suk, 2016; Tran, 2018; Singkum and Chinwonno, 2021; Katemba and Tomatala, 2024; Prasetianto, Maharddhika and Trimus, 2024), vocabulary acquisition (Waring, 2009; Iwata, 2022; Serano, 2023; Fujii, 2024), grammatical development (Sheu, 2003; Mason, 2006; Nakano, 2023), and listening skill development (Renandya and Jacobs, 2016).

In the context of Vietnam, past research has indicated that ER may be particularly beneficial for Vietnamese students, who often read at slow speeds. However, language instructors in Vietnam have faced challenges setting up ER programs, including a lack of reading spaces (Waring and Vu, 2020). In this study, we set up a movable library to overcome this challenge, carried to the classroom weekly. The experiment aimed to determine whether university students would benefit from engaging in an ER program integrated into their regular English curriculum.

### **3. Methodology**

This study addresses the following research question: *Does ER help improve EFL learners' reading rate and comprehension, and if so, to what extent?*

#### **3.1. Research method**

This study adopts an experimental research design to investigate the impact of extensive reading on EFL university students' reading fluency development. During the experiment, the treatment group participated in an extensive reading program, providing access to a wide range of readers and encouraging regular, self-paced reading for enjoyment and fluency improvement. In contrast, the control group followed the university's usual English syllabus, which focused on intensive reading activities. To assess the effectiveness of the intervention, both groups underwent pre-tests and post-tests designed to measure two key components of reading fluency: reading rate and reading comprehension. The pre-tests established baseline proficiency levels, while the post-tests evaluated progress after the intervention. This experimental approach, incorporating a comparative design with control and treatment conditions, ensures a systematic investigation of the causal relationship between extensive reading practices and improvements in reading fluency. Additionally, the study's design allows for quantitative analysis of the observed changes, thus contributing to the understanding of best practices in EFL reading instruction.

#### **3.2. Participants**

This study engaged 206 university students enrolled in the English Language Teacher Education and English Linguistics programs at a university in Central Vietnam. These students were in their first or second year and registered in a course named *English Reading and Writing*. Most participants had minimal exposure to the concept of ER and had not previously applied ER methods in their studies.

For the experiment, five intact classes, which initially consisted of 95 students, were randomly assigned as the treatment group. Four other intact classes with 114 students were randomly assigned as the control group. After the experiment, three participants in the treatment group did not take the post-test, so their results were excluded from the data analysis, leaving the treatment group with a total of 92 students.

#### **3.3. Materials**

The ER materials provided to the treatment group were carefully selected to support the principles of ER, wherein students engage with texts that are both accessible and enjoyable, thus promoting natural language acquisition through substantial reading practice. Around 140 graded readers were used for the study, encompassing various genres, including fiction, non-fiction, and cultural stories. These readers varied in difficulty levels, from elementary to advanced, to ensure that each participant had access to texts that matched their language proficiency. The aim was to enable students to read comfortably without excessive reliance on a dictionary. This would facilitate an immersive reading experience that could enhance fluency. The books were placed in two boxes and brought to the classrooms where the participants attended their course lessons. This was done to avoid the inconvenience of asking them to go to a different place on campus for ER time.

Two reading texts designed by Tran and Nation (2014) were utilized for the pre-test and post-test. Each text contained approximately 700 words and was accompanied by 10 comprehension questions. These pre- and post-tests assessed the student's reading rate and reading comprehension.

### **3.4. Procedure**

Before the experiment, the treatment and control groups took the pre-test. They had been informed that the test would not affect their academic grades. This was to ensure honest responses from the participants. Before distributing the reading text, the researcher explained the procedure, emphasizing that the students should read the text in a single, continuous flow without pausing or rereading. The participants were then asked to use their phones as timers and to record their reading duration in precise minutes and seconds. The reading sheets were then provided face-down. Once all participants had received the reading text, they were instructed to flip it over, start their timers, and begin reading. Upon finishing, they would write their reading time on the top left corner of the sheet and return it to the researcher. Following this, the comprehension question sheets were distributed, and the participants were instructed to answer the questions based on memory without referring back to the text. Names and student IDs were added to each sheet for data analysis.

During the 15-week experiment, the treatment and control groups followed different routines. Each participant in the treatment group was given an account on MReader, a quiz site for ER books. This site allows reading instructors to verify that learners have read and understood their reading materials. After that, the students engaged in weekly ER sessions of about 100 minutes. In each session, 70 graded readers were placed on a desk, allowing the participants to select books matching their abilities and interests. They were encouraged to read without a dictionary and to switch to a lower level if a book proved too challenging. As the students finished reading one book, they would log into their MReader account to complete corresponding comprehension questions. The participants were reassured that MReader scores would not affect academic grades, which was done to maximize honest engagement with the material. In contrast, the control group followed regular classroom activities outlined in their curriculum, which involved reading texts and completing assignments from the textbook under the instructor's guidance. These activities followed the standard syllabus focusing on intensive reading and traditional comprehension tasks typically used in these courses.

After 15 weeks, the post-test was administered to both groups to measure reading comprehension and rate changes.

## **4. Findings and discussion**

This study measured reading rate by calculating the number of words read per minute. This was done by dividing the total number of words in the reading text by the total time (in seconds). Meanwhile, reading comprehension was measured by tallying the correct answers to the 10 comprehension questions accompanying the text.

### **4.1. Reading rate**

The data indicated that the treatment group (N=92) and the control group (N=114) were reading at quite similar speeds (124.16 wpm and 119.93 wpm, respectively) on the pre-test. However, on the post-test, the treatment group showed a significant improvement

( $p=0.001$ ), whereas the control group had only a slight increase to 123.13 wpm. The treatment group obtained a 12.44 wpm gain compared to a 3.20 wpm gain by the control group (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Paired-samples T-Test results for reading rate

	<i>Control group</i>	<i>Treatment group</i>
<b><i>Pre-test</i></b>		
Mean	119.93	124.16
SD	39.71	37.73
N (Sample size)	114	92
<b><i>Post-test</i></b>		
Mean	123.13	136.60
SD	45.28	51.74
N (Sample size)	114	92
<b><i>Mean difference</i></b>	3.20	12.44
<b><i>p-value</i></b>	0.48	0.001

These findings suggest that engagement in ER helped the treatment participants improve their reading speeds to a substantial extent. This could be because ER, focusing on meaning rather than form, encourages a more natural and fluid reading style. As the students began to read without having to analyze each sentence for vocabulary or grammar learning, as is typically done in intensive reading sessions, they felt more comfortable speeding up.

#### 4.2. Reading comprehension

As can be seen from Table 2, the control group (N=114) scored 5.22 out of 10 for comprehension on the pre-test. Similarly, the treatment group (N=92) gained 5.34 out of 10. This indicates that there was no significant difference between the two groups before the experiment. On the post-test, however, the treatment group made a remarkably more significant improvement with a score of 7.05, while the control group scored only 5.63. This result indicated that ER helped the treatment group improve their reading comprehension to a greater extent.

**Table 2:** Paired-samples T-Test results for reading comprehension

	<i>Control group</i>	<i>Treatment group</i>
<b><i>Pre-test</i></b>		
Mean	5.22	5.34
SD	2.23	2.05
N (Sample size)	114	92
<b><i>Post-test</i></b>		
Mean	5.63	7.05
SD	2.40	2.20
N (Sample size)	114	92
<b><i>Mean difference</i></b>	0.41	1.72
<b><i>p-value</i></b>	0.15	0.000

The findings highlight the benefits of ER in promoting understanding through extensive language exposure and emphasis on meaning. They are consistent with previous research (Suk, 2016; Waring, 2009; Tran, 2018; Beglar *et al.*, 2021; Singkum and Chinwonno, 2021; Iwata, 2022; Nakano, 2023). Language instructors have often feared that increasing reading speed might reduce reading comprehension. However, the findings withdrawn from this study have alleviated such concerns and emphasized the positive impacts of ER on EFL learners' reading fluency development.

The significant speed improvement made by the treatment group can be attributed to key features of ER, particularly its emphasis on graded language. Since ER involves engaging with large volumes of text at an appropriate level, it enhances familiarity with vocabulary and sentence structures and promotes intuitive language processing. By encouraging learners to prioritize understanding over word-for-word translation, ER helps boost learners' reading rates. In this study, it was found that the treatment group showed a substantial increase in reading comprehension. This is likely due to the emphasis on understanding meaning rather than decoding individual words. In ER, students are freed from the worries associated with vocabulary and grammar exercises that they are typically required to do in intensive reading. Therefore, they can dedicate cognitive resources entirely to comprehending the text, thus increasing their comprehension level.

The findings from the research suggest that integrating ER into EFL curricula greatly benefits learners. Providing opportunities for students to read for pleasure regularly is an effective way to boost their reading fluency. Weekly ER sessions, integrated into the existing English program, can promote EFL learners' development of both reading speed and reading comprehension. It is advisable that, in curricula with one weekly class of two or three periods, teachers allocate one period to ER. For curricula that contain two weekly classes of two or three periods, one entire class can be dedicated to ER.

## 5. Conclusion

This study confirms that ER effectively enhances reading fluency among Vietnamese EFL university students. The results show that students who participated in the ER program improved reading speed and comprehension substantially compared to those who did not. These findings suggest that incorporating ER into EFL curricula could be a powerful strategy for supporting language acquisition, helping students become more confident and proficient readers. Given the benefits, educators and curriculum designers should consider allocating time for regular ER sessions within English programs to optimize students' reading development. Future research could further explore the long-term effects of ER on other language skills, such as writing and speaking, or investigate how varying the frequency and duration of ER sessions might influence learners' progress. Overall, this study highlights the value of ER as an effective and practical approach to teaching reading while potentially fostering other language skills.

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## TÓM TẮT

### **ẢNH HƯỞNG CỦA ĐỌC MỞ RỘNG ĐỐI VỚI MỨC ĐỘ HIỂU VÀ TỐC ĐỘ ĐỌC CỦA SINH VIÊN HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ MỘT NGOẠI NGỮ**

**Trần Thị Ngọc Yến, Nguyễn Thị Kim Anh, Nguyễn Viết Hưng**  
*Khoa Sư phạm Ngoại ngữ, Trường Đại học Vinh, Nghệ An, Việt Nam*

Ngày nhận bài 25/8/2024, ngày nhận đăng 11/10/2024

Đọc mở rộng đã được công nhận là một trong những phương pháp để phát triển độ trôi chảy khi đọc. Tuy nhiên, trong bối cảnh dạy học Tiếng Anh ở Việt Nam, đọc mở rộng chưa được nghiên cứu rộng rãi trên đối tượng sinh viên đại học. Nghiên cứu này có mục đích khám phá các giá trị của đọc mở rộng đối với tốc độ đọc và mức độ hiểu của sinh viên. Dữ liệu nghiên cứu được thu thập thông qua thực nghiệm kéo dài 15 tuần. Người tham gia là sinh viên đang theo học chương trình Tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam. Năm nhóm lớp được lựa chọn ngẫu nhiên để làm nhóm đối chứng và bốn nhóm lớp được lựa chọn để làm nhóm thực nghiệm. Sự tiến bộ của người tham gia được đánh giá thông qua bài kiểm tra tiền thực nghiệm và sau thực nghiệm. Trong quá trình thực nghiệm, nhóm thực nghiệm thực hiện việc đọc mở rộng trong khoảng 100 phút mỗi tuần với các sách truyện bằng Tiếng Anh phù hợp với mức độ từ vựng của họ. Trong khi đó, nhóm đối chứng thực hiện các hoạt động học kỹ năng đọc trên lớp theo chương trình dạy học bình thường. Kết quả cho thấy nhóm thực nghiệm cải thiện đáng kể cả về mức độ hiểu và tốc độ đọc. Nghiên cứu này cho thấy giá trị của việc đưa đọc mở rộng vào khung chương trình dạy học Tiếng Anh thông thường ở các trường đại học và nhấn mạnh vai trò của đọc mở rộng đối với việc phát triển năng lực Tiếng Anh nói chung.

**Từ khóa:** Đọc mở rộng; tốc độ đọc; mức độ hiểu; độ trôi chảy khi đọc.