

Enjoyment and challenges of advanced EFL learners in online extensive reading

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of extensive reading (ER) on Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) among advanced-level Chinese EFL learners, the interplay between reading enjoyment and material difficulty, and the challenges and strategies related to online ER. The following research questions are addressed: (a) what are the effects of a semester-long ER program on learners' FLE, (b) what are the bi-weekly patterns of reading enjoyment and their relationship with material difficulty, and (c) what are the challenges and coping strategies for online reading? 55 first-year English majors at a Chinese university participated in the study, engaging in ER through an adaptive online platform, *ReadTheory*, over 18 weeks. Data were collected through questionnaires, bi-weekly reading reports, and final reflections. The data analyses were quantitatively performed using SPSS and qualitatively conducted by thematic coding. Results revealed a significant increase in FLE. This study showed a significant negative correlation between bi-weekly reading enjoyment and perceived material difficulty. Despite this, learners faced challenges with specialized vocabulary, long and complex sentence structures, time management, driving force, and comprehension of quizzes. Participants employed diverse strategies to overcome these obstacles, including rereading, translating texts into their L1, using dictionaries, setting reading goals, and adopting time management techniques. These findings underscore the pedagogical value of integrating ER into language programs and highlight the necessity of balancing material difficulty to maintain learner motivation and enjoyment.

Keywords: extensive reading (ER); foreign language enjoyment (FLE); advanced EFL learners; learner strategies for ER; online reading; challenges in online reading; *ReadTheory* online platform; online reading material assessment

Introduction

As a foreign language learning and teaching approach, extensive reading (ER) refers to reading a large number of level-appropriate materials for general understanding, pleasure, and information (Day & Bamford, 1998). ER is different from traditional approaches to teaching reading in terms of the difficulty level of materials, the autonomy of readers, and the quantity of reading (Nakanishi, 2015). ER has been widely practiced mainly in a variety of English as a foreign language contexts (Zhou, 2024), but an increasing number of ER studies have also been conducted in other foreign language contexts, such as Japanese as a foreign language (Mohar, 2024), French as a foreign language (Jourdan-Ôtsuka, 2022; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006), German as a foreign language (Arnold, 2009; Rankin, 2005) and Chinese as a foreign language (Zhou & Day, 2023) contexts. ER has been revealed to play a positive role in the acquisition of both language skills (e.g., vocabulary, Iwata, 2022; grammar, Nakano, 2023; writing, Kim & Ro, 2023; speaking, Zhou & Day, 2023; reading speed, Bui & Macalister, 2021) and in the enhancement of affective aspects of language learning (e.g., reading attitude, Yamashita, 2004; reading motivation, Takase, 2007; flow experience, Tabata-Sandom, 2023).

Currently, advanced learners are a relatively neglected group in ER research. As Tabata-Sandom (2023) pointed out, ER research has been disproportionately targeting particular demographics such as Asian learners, tertiary learners, and elementary/intermediate learners. Advanced learners (e.g., post-tertiary advanced learners in Tabata-Sandom, 2023) remain as an under-researched population.

Furthermore, with the development of positive psychology, much research has been conducted to examine the interconnections between positive emotions such as Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE), joy, pride, interest, hope and love, well-being, and language learning (e.g., Li, 2022; Oladrostam et al., 2022). Although FLE and its role in language learning has been widely researched in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), it is a less-commonly explored topic in ER research. Enjoyment in ER has been mainly examined from the perspective of reading attitude and viewed as a sub-theme of reading attitude or reading motivation (e.g., Ro, 2013).

Therefore, this study examined the extent to which one semester's extensive reading affected FLE among EFL learners with advanced language proficiency. Furthermore, it investigated the extent to which reading enjoyment and the difficulty level of reading materials were correlated. The challenges and strategies to tackle them were explored. This study contributes to the following areas of ER research: First, the effects of ER on an important positive psychology factor FLE were investigated. Second, perceived reading enjoyment and material difficulty level were measured nine times on a biweekly basis. The continuous assessment of the two constructs provided abundant information on the interconnections of the two factors. Thirdly, the study reported challenges encountered by advanced EFL learners while reading materials of special genres (e.g., science articles) and the strategies they adopted to overcome them. Lastly, this study explored the ER experiences of advanced EFL learners in China, which is a relatively neglected group in ER research. By examining variations in reading enjoyment, material difficulty perception, and strategy use among advanced EFL learners, this study contributes to individual

differences research, shedding light on how personal cognitive and affective factors shape the ER experience.

Literature Review

ER and Reading Enjoyment

The concept of enjoyment has been closely related to the theory and practice of ER. Day and Bamford (1998) proposed the top ten principles of ER, which have been either strictly or loosely followed by ER practitioners. Principle 7 of the top 10 principles states: “The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information, or general understanding” (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 8). The purpose of ER is to develop enthusiastic L2 learners who find joy in reading (Zhou, 2024). Principle 7 has been widely implemented in ER teaching. In a meta-analysis conducted by Day (2015), Principle 7 was implemented in 28 out of 44 ER programs examined.

Research has shown that interesting reading materials are a source of reading enjoyment. The participant in Ro (2013) experienced enjoyment while reading comic books and English colloquial expressions. The autonomy of self-selecting materials also enabled L1-Thai L2-English readers to experience joy and satisfaction (e.g., Fongpaiboon, 2017). One reader was “engrossed” in some reading materials and visualized the story as if he/she were in the book (Fongpaiboon, 2017, p. 71). The readers experienced enjoyment and happiness and would like to read more (Fongpaiboon, 2017). L2 German readers in Rankin (2005) reported that ER materials gave them a sense of empowerment and enjoyment.

Post-reading activities are another source of enjoyment in ER. Zhou and Day (2023) revealed that 70% of the participants in a L2 Chinese ER program enjoyed post-reading activities. Factors contributing to the enjoyment included: (a) providing activities to interact with classmates, (b) solidifying comprehension, (c) a variety of activities, (d) different from normal classroom activities, and (e) forcing them to read (Zhou & Day, 2023). Despite the empirical evidence that students felt enjoyment and satisfaction from reading interesting materials and conducting ER activities, there has been a lack of empirical research on whether the enjoyment experienced in reading would transform into a joyful experience of learning that foreign language.

ER and FLE

In the field of second language acquisition, FLE has been established as one of the cornerstones of individual differences research (e.g., Botes et al., 2021; Dewaele, 2022; Li et al., 2022). FLE was defined as a broad positive emotion that is experienced by language learners while learning a foreign language (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). FLE has been found to be positively linked to other linguistic or affective factors, for example, stronger motivation, greater willingness to communicate, better academic achievement, and so on (Botes et al., 2021).

Multiple factors might play a role in enhancing FLE. The first set of variables might be related to language teachers. Research has shown that teachers’ teaching styles, behaviors, and attitudes can greatly impact learners’ FLE (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). The

multiple regression analysis in Jiang and Dewaele (2019) revealed that the FLE of Chinese EFL learners was best predicted by three teacher-related variables (attitudes toward the teacher, teacher's joking, and friendliness of the teacher) (43.2%).

Positive and interactive peer interaction experiences also contribute to higher FLE (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). One of the participants in Jiang and Dewaele (2019) mentioned that during peer interaction, they can exchange ideas with different classmates, learn others' views, broaden their views, and learn vocabulary and grammar expressions from their peers. Their findings revealed that positive and cooperative interactions among peers contributed to a heightened sense of belonging, which is critical in reducing feelings of isolation often experienced in language classrooms. The study emphasized that when learners engaged in collaborative activities and received support from their peers, they are more likely to develop a positive attitude toward the learning environment, felt emotionally secure, and participated actively.

Well-designed classroom activities seem to be another important source of FLE (e.g., Jiang & Dewaele, 2019). Chinese EFL learners in Jiang and Dewaele (2019) mentioned that new, creative, and interesting classroom activities such as watching TED talks and roleplays created enjoyment and led to effective learning. The use of technologies in language that make learning more engaging and interactive has been shown to increase FLE (e.g., Lee & Lee, 2021). Lee and Lee (2021) examined how the informal digital learning of English (IDLE) and ideal L2 self were related to FLE among 661 Korean EFL learners. The results of hierarchical regression analysis indicated that IDLE and ideal L2 self significantly predicted all learner groups' FLE. The findings revealed that engaging in digital activities out of the class enhanced the enjoyment of learning English as a foreign language.

Friendly teachers, well-designed activities, and positive peer interaction experience all contribute to a safe, engaging, and interactive classroom where learners feel comfortable participating and making mistakes, contributing to higher FLE (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). Learner-related variables also contribute to FLE. In particular, improved language proficiency might be another important source of FLE. For example, one participant in an EAP program in Zhou and Day (2021) observed improvements in his language proficiency from reading extensively, they were more willing to read his academic textbooks and learn English.

Despite the effort to investigate sources of FLE and link FLE to other linguistic and affective variables, there is a lack of research on how ER is related to FLE. Theoretically, as an innovative approach to language teaching and learning, ER might promote FLE since students are reading level-appropriate, interesting, and self-selected materials and might engage in a variety of post ER activities that create opportunities for peer interaction. This study will try to fill this research gap by examining the extent to which ER might contribute to FLE.

Reading Enjoyment and Reading Materials

Extensive reading materials provide comprehensible and interesting input to language learners. Materials play a vital part in the successful implementation of ER and creating an enjoyable reading experience, which are "the lure and the ladder" to develop reading interests (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 96). In ER programs, the lure is the interesting and attractive materials to

hook the students to read. Day and Bamford (1998) proposed that “the reading material is easy” (p.137). Easy, according to Day and Bamford (1998), means that reading materials must be well within the readers’ language competence in the foreign language. This is particularly true for beginning-level readers. Learners with low language proficiency tend to read more and enjoy more if the materials are easy. Day and Bamford (1998) recommended that readers read at i minus1 level.

The ladder refers to the wide range of the materials (Day & Bamford, 1998). Day and Bamford (1998) proposed a wide range of materials for ER programs, including language learner literature, children’s books, learners’ own stories, newspapers, magazines, popular and simple literature, young adult literature, comics, and translations. The materials can range from very easy to very challenging, allowing learners to progress upward as their reading proficiency improves.

Though genres are an important construct in L2 reading and writing, there has been a scarcity of discussion on the role of genres of reading materials in ER programs. One of the main reasons is that most ER materials currently used in ER programs are graded readers or language learner literature. Existing ER research shows that readers who conduct narrow reading, that is to encounter texts of the same content several times (Krashen, 2004), read more quickly on the same genre that they were familiar with (Robb & Ewert, 2024). On the one hand, materials of certain genres such as science texts might pose challenges for language learners since they usually contain specialized vocabulary and complex sentence structures. On the other hand, science texts are common genre types for language learners to encounter in certain contexts (e.g., EAP or high-stakes language proficiency tests such as *TOEFL* or *IELTS*). This is especially true for advanced language learners because they encounter texts of those genres more and more frequently as their language proficiency improves. Currently, the experience of using science texts as reading materials in ER programs has not been widely researched.

Easy reading materials in ER programs do not mean that learners always read easy materials. This is why ER experts like Day and Bamford (1998) used the term level-appropriate materials when referring to ER materials selection. One of the ER principles proposed that students should read level-appropriate reading materials (Day & Bamford, 1998). The implication of this principle is that language learners should gauge their language proficiency levels and adjust the difficulty levels of the materials accordingly. When learners’ language proficiency and reading skills are low, they can start by reading easy materials. However, when their language proficiency and reading comprehension abilities improve, they should level up and choose materials that match their increased proficiency levels.

Reading appropriate materials is important because it contributes to the optimal reading experience. For example, one of the conditions of gaining a reading experience with a sense of flow (i.e., the most enjoyable experience where self-consciousness is lost, Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Kirchoff, 2013) is that a reader’s skills match challenges and that there is an optimal balance between the challenges and the skills. This means that the reading materials cannot be too easy or too challenging. This also indicates that when readers’ reading skills and proficiency improve, they can take on more challenges by reading books that are appropriate at their new levels.

The current findings on ER material selection by advanced learners are mixed. Some ER research did show that advanced learners tended to choose more challenging materials (Arnold, 2009; Tabata-Sandom, 2023). Advanced learners in ER research were either those who enrolled in advanced language courses (e.g., Arnold, 2009) or those whose language proficiency was measured by certain types of tests (e.g., by vocabulary size test in Tabata-Sandom, 2023). In Arnold (2009), ER was implemented in an advanced composition and conversation course among 8 advanced L2 German learners. The study revealed that five out of eight participants purposefully chose more difficult texts to challenge themselves. Similarly, post-tertiary advanced learners in Tabata-Sandom (2023) gained a sense of achievement from reading challenging high-level readers on Xreading.com. However, some interviewees in Zhou and Day (2021) indicated that they tended to choose easy materials to read or kept on selecting easy materials that were well below their reading proficiency levels because they just wanted to complete the ER assignment. An online reading platform like *ReadTheory* (<https://readtheory.org>) that was used in this study could automatically assign texts that match learners' reading abilities, which to some extent provided assistance to material selection in ER programs.

Challenges and Learner Strategies in ER

Challenges in ER research either refer to those encountered in implementing ER by language teachers or those experienced by students while doing ER. First, ER is still a less commonly adopted language teaching approach (e.g., Chang & Renandya, 2017; Ewert, 2020) and has not become "more popular" (Robb, 2022, p. 184). Challenges in implementing ER may include but are not limited to lack of time, lack of resources, and lack of administrative support (Renandya et al., 2021; Robb, 2022). Some students are not confident or not interested in reading in their L2 and have difficulty reading independently (Zhou, 2024). With an increasing number of ER being conducted online, teachers and students may encounter technical issues (e.g., Zhou & Day, 2021). As for coping with the challenges, ER scholars proposed incorporating ER into language programs. As Habib and Watkins (2023) stated, this is the only way to legalize ER. With curriculum adjustments and institutional support, ER can significantly benefit learners across educational contexts (Zhou, 2024). Other strategies included providing ER orientation to students (Zhou, 2024), teachers providing continuous guidance and support (Tabata-Sandom, 2023), and setting clear reading goals (e.g., Leather & Uden, 2021).

Students also encountered challenges while doing ER. One study (Suk, 2024) examined the strategies students adopted while reading extensively online. The participants were seven L1 Korean EFL college students. ER was implemented as part of class activities over eight weeks. Graded readers were provided and displayed at the front of the classroom for students to select. Students read silently for 10 to 15 minutes and complete a writing activity. Students were also asked to keep reading logs and short book reviews. Data were collected from pre- and post-reading strategies using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and teacher's reflection notes. The study revealed that the students engaged with the ER texts by using a variety of reading strategies, such as rereading, guessing unknown words, skipping words, visualizing the plot, checking and monitoring reading comprehension, using a dictionary or translator, translating English into L1, adjusting the speed of reading, choosing books carefully, and making predictions. The study also revealed that the frequency of reading strategies fluctuated for

individual readers as they gained more ER experience. Overall, there is a lack of research on the strategies adopted by advanced EFL readers while reading level-appropriate materials online.

This Study

This study was conducted to fill in the research gaps discussed in the literature review section. First, this study intended to examine how ER influences learners' FLE, particularly among college English majors with advanced language proficiency over an extended period. Furthermore, understanding the interplay between reading enjoyment and the difficulty level of reading materials on a bi-weekly basis can offer valuable insights for material selection in ER programs. Moreover, as online platforms become increasingly integral to education, it is crucial to investigate the challenges students face while reading science texts (e.g., expository and argumentative articles) online and the strategies they employ to overcome the obstacles posed by a specific genre. This study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does one semester's ER affect FLE among college English majors?

RQ2: What are the perceived levels of bi-weekly reading enjoyment and difficulty levels of reading materials? To what extent is bi-weekly reading enjoyment related to the bi-weekly reading difficulty level of reading materials?

RQ3: What difficulties do students encounter while reading extensively online and how do learners tackle the challenges?

Method

Participants

The participants were 55 college freshmen at a public university in China. Students were from two classes (hereinafter Class 1 and Class 2). Those from Class 1 were majoring in English and those in Class 2 were majoring in English Interpretation. The mean age of the participants was 18.98 ($SD = .727$), ranging from 18 to 20 years old. Forty-two of the participants were female (80.8%) and 10 were male (19.2%). The ethnicity of the participants¹ was Han (46, 88.5%), Gelao (1, 1.9%), Zhuang (2, 3.8%), Tujia (1, 1.9%), Dong (1, 1.9%), and Buyi (1, 1.9%). The majority of the participants had no experience participating in an ER program before (43, 82.7%), and only 9 of them (17.3%) said they had participated in an ER program. As for the time spent on reading per week, 21 participants (40.4%) read 1-2 hours, 15 (28.8%) 3-4 hours, 12 (25%) 5-6 hours, 1 (1.9%) 7-8 hours, and 2 (3.8%) 9-10 hours. Three students did not complete either the pre- or the post-questionnaire, so they were removed from the final data analysis.

The participants were labeled advanced-level learners according to the following standards. First, Uden et al (2014) ranked their participants whose vocabulary sizes ranged from 4700 to 6000

word families (WF) as upper-intermediate. In keeping with this standard, Tabata-Sandam categorized her participants whose average vocabulary size was 7081 WF as advanced L2 English learners. The average vocabulary size of the participants in this study was 7200 WF ($SD = 1246$, $Min = 5000$ WF, $Max = 10,000$ WF). Secondly, the participants were all English majors in a foreign language university. Their average English subject score in the college entrance examination (i.e., Gaokao) was 127 out of 150 ($SD = 4.4$, $Min = 120$, $Max = 138$). Following those standards, the participants in this study were categorized as advanced learners.

Context

The participants were taking a *Comprehensive English (II)* course. This course is one of the basic and core courses for first-year English majors. Its main purpose was to cultivate students' solid basic English language skills and improve students' ability to comprehensively use the English language. Students were expected to skillfully use the basic skills of listening comprehension, oral expression, reading comprehension, writing, and translation, and gradually develop the ability to use English. A textbook called *An Integrated English Course* (Zhang, 2023) was adopted as the main teaching material for the course. This course was held twice a week on Tuesday and Wednesday, with two 40-minute sessions each.

ER was one of the components of the course. Students were required to read online at *ReadTheory* every week and complete the quiz. The teacher did not specify the number of passages students needed to read but encouraged them to read as much as possible and to read every day instead. Though there was no requirement on the number of passages read, students were required to complete an ER activity every two weeks. Students were also encouraged to complete a reading report every week through *Wenjuanxing.com* (see Appendix A for the reading record form). Appendix B contains the ER activities and their descriptions. As long as students completed the ER activities, they got the ER credit for the two weeks. Students shared their ER activities with classmates on Wednesday's classes. The final grade of the course was composed of the final exam (50%), midterm exam (2.5%), weekly vocabulary quizzes (15%), attendance (5%), participation (7.5%), final project (12.5 %), and ER (7.5%).

Online reading platform

ReadTheory was selected as the reading platform for the participants. *ReadTheory* is a free online educational platform that provides adaptive reading materials for language learners at various proficiency levels. It features an extensive library of graded reading passages, each accompanied by a series of multiple-choice questions designed to assess and improve reading skills. Students were asked to complete a pre-reading test through which their reading levels were determined. The platform also adjusted the difficulty levels of the materials based on quiz scores. If the quiz was 80% and above, materials at a higher level would be provided next time. If the quiz score was 60% or below, materials at a lower level would be provided.

Instruments

The following instruments were used in this study.

Background Information Questionnaire. A background information questionnaire was designed to gain information on the participants' age, gender, ethnicity, hours spent on reading per week, genres they enjoyed reading, challenges encountered in reading, and benefits of reading. The questionnaire was in Mandarin Chinese and are available upon request from the author.

S-FLE. A short-form foreign language enjoyment scale was adapted from Botes et al. (2021) to measure participants' enjoyment in learning English as a foreign language. The questionnaire was in Mandarin Chinese and can be requested from the author. The scale had sound internal consistency with this sample, with a Cronbach's α of .912 for the pre-FLE and .917 for the post-FLE.

Biweekly Reading Report. The bi-weekly reading report (Appendix A), presented to learners in Mandarin Chinese and also answered by them in that language, was designed to collect information on bi-weekly reading performance. There were seven questions on the reading report. Questions 1 and 2 asked about their names and classes. The third question asked about the length they spent reading over the past two weeks. The fourth question asked about the number of passages students read over the two weeks. Question 5 asked the participants to briefly explain what they have learned (i.e., knowledge, vocabulary, grammar). Question 6 asked the participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement "I enjoyed the materials read" (5 = Strongly Agree; 4 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 2 = Disagree; 1 = Strongly Disagree). Question 7 asked the participants to evaluate the difficulty level of the reading materials on a Likert scale with five options (5 = Very Easy; 4 = Easy; 3 = Appropriate; 2 = Difficult; 1 = Very Difficult).

Final Reflection. The end of the semester final reflection (Appendix C), also in Mandarin Chinese, asked the participants to reflect on their ER reading for the whole semester. The participants answered 11 open-ended questions on their L1 reading experience, their previous L2 reading instruction, ER reading experience this semester, the genres of reading they like, their perceptions of the benefits of ER, their views of ER activities, the challenges encountered doing ER, and suggestions for future ER programs.

Data Collection

In an ER program, an ER orientation was recommended because L2 readers would be more inclined to participate in ER if they understood its benefits (Day & Bamford, 1998; Zhou, 2024). Thus, an ER orientation was conducted at the beginning of Week 1 to introduce the definition of ER, the benefits of ER, weekly reading requirements, and the assessment of ER. After the orientation, the background information questionnaire was delivered through *Wenjuanxing*. Students read online at *ReadTheory* weekly and completed the quizzes. Every two weeks, students completed reading reports online through *Wenjuanxing*. Bi-weekly ER activities were submitted to online folders in a language learning management system called *Dingding*. Thus, when students shared ER activities, they could open each other's ER activity files. The final reflection was collected at the end of the semester at Week 18 through *Wenjuanxing*.

Data Analyses

The background questionnaire and bi-weekly reading reports were analyzed using *SPSS* Version 27. The descriptive statistics and inferential statistics were run and reported. The qualitative final reflection data was coded following the procedures proposed by qualitative scholars (Saldaña, 2021). Specifically, the analysis was conducted in the following procedure: (a) grouping of emerging ideas into relevant themes; (b) identifying differences and similarities; (c) comparing and contrasting themes to uncover relationships; and (d) checking the accuracy of coding by re-reading (Suk, 2024).

Results

RQ1: To what extent does one semester's ER affect Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) among college English majors?

As is shown in Table 1, the mean of FLE for the two combined classes at the beginning of the semester was 4.62 ($SD = .47$). The mean of FLE at the end of the semester was 4.73 ($SD = .43$). The participants in this study generally experienced joy in learning English and felt being supported and encouraged in their English classes. To test whether there was a significant difference in pre-FLE and post-FLE, a General Linear Model repeated measures ANOVA was performed on FLE. A significant effect was observed, $F(1, 51) = 4.35, p = .04, \eta^2 = .079$, observed power = .534. The approximate Cohen's d for the repeated-measures ANOVA is 0.293. η^2 and Cohen's d suggested a small to medium effect size (Cohen, 1988). The significant result indicated that after one semester's ER, learners enjoyed learning English significantly more.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE)*

	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Skewness (SD)	Kurtosis (SD)
FLE pre	2.83	5	4.62	.47	-1.43 (.33)	2.30 (.65)
FLE post	2.00	5	4.73	.43	-2.04 (.33)	4.43 (.65)

RQ2: What are the perceived levels of bi-weekly reading enjoyment and difficulty levels of reading materials? To what extent is bi-weekly reading enjoyment related to the bi-weekly reading difficulty level of reading materials?

Table 2 shows that the participants in this study on average spent one hour (65.9 minutes, $SD = 38$) reading every two weeks. There is also individual variation in terms of time spent on reading. For example, one participant only spent 10 minutes reading in Week 1 & 2, another participant, however, spent almost four hours (230 minutes) reading. The same pattern could be observed from other weeks as well. This suggests huge variation exists between time spent on reading by different students.

Table 2. *Length of Reading in Minutes*

Week	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Range	Kurtosis	SE	Skewness	SE
W1&2	78.44	49.95	10	140	230	1.219	.688	1.09	.35
W3&4	82.48	49.91	7	220	213	.721	.887	.74	.46
W5&6	68.28	52.97	25	240	215	7.551	1.091	2.52	.56
W7&8	64.90	40.71	10	180	170	1.869	.821	1.32	.42
W9&10	70.00	29.15	30	120	90	-0.783	1.121	.47	.58
W11&12	57.50	29.33	30	140	110	3.049	1.091	1.59	.56
W13&14	61.96	15.00	15	240	225	10.34	.935	2.82	.48
W15&16	51.43	24.13	20	100	80	-0.191	1.154	.84	.60
W17&18	58.11	50.99	6	200	194	2.621	1.038	1.59	.54
Total	65.90	38.02	17	176	170	2.933	.981	1.442	.51

In terms of the number of passages read on *ReadTheory*, Table 3 shows that students on average read 5.4 passages every two weeks. Again there was much variation between individuals. Some participants only read 1 passage over the two weeks, while some others read 23 passages (e.g., Week 3 & 4).

Table 3. *Number of Passages Read*

Week	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Range	Kurtosis	SE	Skewness	SE
W1&2	6.5	4.87	1	20	19	1.886	.688	1.51	.35
W3&4	7.6	5.1	1	23	22	1.913	.887	1.36	.46
W5&6	5.2	3.6	2	16	14	5.083	1.091	2.14	.56
W7&8	5.7	2.93	1	15	14	2.35	.833	1.16	.43
W9&10	5.8	2.93	3	15	12	7.105	1.121	2.46	.58
W11&12	4.4	2.63	2	12	10	3.746	1.091	1.74	.56
W13&14	4.9	3.28	1	14	13	1.987	.935	1.45	.48
W15&16	4.1	2.35	2	10	8	2.139	1.154	1.51	.60
W17&18	4.6	3.29	1	12	11	.399	1.038	0.99	.54
Total	5.4	3.44	2	15	14	2.956	.982	1.59	.51

As for the levels of enjoyment in what they read on *ReadTheory* (see Table 4), the participants on average enjoyed the materials ($M = 3.91$, $SD = .717$). The enjoyment level ranged from 3.75 in Weeks 11 & 12 to 4.06 in Weeks 17 & 18.

Table 4. *Perceived Levels of Reading Enjoyment*

Week	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Range	Kurtosis	SE	Skewness	SE
W1&2	3.87	.687	3	5	2	-.804	.688	.17	.35
W3&4	3.96	.720	3	5	2	-.944	.887	.06	.46
W5&6	3.81	.834	2	5	3	.100	1.091	-.4	.56
W7&8	3.97	.706	3	5	2	-.877	.821	.05	.42
W9&10	3.93	.799	3	5	2	-1.348	1.121	-.13	.58

W11&12	3.75	.775	3	5	2	-1.062	1.091	.49	.56
W13&14	3.83	.650	3	5	2	-.462	.935	.18	.48
W15&16	4.00	.555	3	5	2	1.33	1.154	0	.60
W17&18	4.06	.725	2	5	3	3.133	1.038	-1.13	.54
Total	3.91	.717	3	5	3	-0.104	.981	-0.08	.51

As for difficulty levels of the materials read bi-weekly (see Table 5), the participants on average perceived that the difficulty levels of reading materials were appropriate ($M = 3.121$, $SD = 0.652$), meaning not too easy nor too difficult. Interestingly, participants' perceptions of the difficulty level of the materials changed over time. Some participants indicated that the materials were "Very Difficult" ($Min = 1$) when they first started reading (e.g., W1 & 2, W3 & 4). In the middle of the semester, after they continued doing ER (e.g., W5 & 6, W7 & 8, W9 & 10, W11 & 12), no participants indicated that the materials were "Very Difficult". Some of them indicated "Difficult" ($Min = 2$). Approaching the end of the ER program at W13 & 14, W15 & 16, and W17 & 18, no participants perceived the materials as "Difficult" or "Very Difficult" ($Min = 3$). This might indicate that as they continued to practice reading, the reading materials became easier for the participants as their reading abilities improved.

Table 5. *Perceived Difficulty Levels of Reading Materials*

Week	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Range	Kurtosis	SE	Skewness	SE
W1&2	2.95	0.669	1	5	4	2.830	.724	.06	.35
W3&4	3.04	0.72	1	4	3	1.502	.887	-.75	.46
W5&6	3.06	0.574	2	4	2	.766	1.091	.03	.56
W7&8	3.16	0.583	2	4	2	0	0.821	-.01	.42
W9&10	3.33	0.724	2	5	3	.948	1.121	.68	.58
W11&12	3.19	0.544	2	4	2	.555	1.091	.19	.56
W13&14	3.22	0.518	3	5	2	5.859	.935	2.47	.48
W15&16	3.14	0.77	3	5	3	1.855	1.154	.91	.60
W17&18	3.00	0.767	3	5	3	1.717	1.038	.88	.54
Total	3.121	0.652	2	5	3	1.781	.985	.49	.51

To gauge the interconnection between the average difficulty levels ($M = 3.121$, $SD = 0.652$) of the reading materials and the average level of enjoyment perceived by the learners ($M = 3.91$, $SD = .717$) a Pearson correlation test was conducted. The result showed that the two variables were weakly but significantly negatively correlated with each other at $-.149$ ($p = .036$). When the difficulty level of the materials increases, the enjoyment level decreases. This result was consistent with ER theory (Day & Bamford, 1998) which posits that reading materials need to be easy so that learners are more willing to read and enjoy more.

RQ3: What difficulties do students encounter while reading extensively online and how do learners tackle the challenges?

Challenges students encountered in reading. After coding the responses to Question # 10 in the final reflections (Appendix C), it was found that students encountered challenges while reading online on *ReadTheory*. The main challenges were thematically related to (a) reading materials; (b) time; (c) driving force; and (4) quiz. As for the reading materials, a list of sub-themes was identified: genres of the texts, unknown vocabulary/specialized vocabulary, and long and complex sentences.

The reading materials on *ReadTheory* are diverse, including fiction, non-fiction, historical, biographies, science, social sciences, expository, argumentative texts and so on. Although the reading materials were tailored to learners' reading proficiency levels, materials of certain genres still caused reading difficulties, especially science articles. One participant stated that he could not understand science and technology articles at all.

Excerpt 1:

I can't stand scientific articles at all, and I always get the quiz questions wrong when they come to questions related to numbers. (P13)

Two more participants stated the same:

Excerpt 2:

Some articles are popular science articles involving scientific knowledge, or argumentative articles involving professional terminology. Those articles will be a little difficult to read because there will be knowledge and new words that I do not understand. (P20)

Excerpt 3:

Some popular science articles are boring, contain many proper nouns, are difficult to understand, and I don't have the patience to complete the quiz. (P44).

If students encountered comprehension issues due to the genres of the materials, they usually adopted two strategies. The first one is to reread, and the second one is to translate the passage into Chinese. One participant stated he/she read it several times to understand the meaning of the article more smoothly (e.g., P20). Another one stated he would reread two to three times (P 32).

Participants also chose to translate the article and reread it (e.g., P 49 in Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4:

Sometimes I can't understand the meaning behind the article, so I usually translate it and then interpret it again.

Another issue was *unknown vocabulary/specialized vocabulary*. Vocabulary was mentioned 30 times in 53 responses as one of the biggest challenges encountered during reading, which means that 58% of the students agreed that unknown or specialized vocabulary caused reading difficulties. Students coped with vocabulary challenges differently but positively. One of the common strategies was to look up the unknown words. Participants tended to look up unknown words that appeared repetitively and were closely related to the theme of the reading (P1, *Look*

up new words that appear repeatedly and are related to the topic; P16, After finishing a reading, look up the words immediately; P22, Look up the Oxford dictionary and read the examples in it; P23, Take the initiative to look up the dictionary).

Some participants tried to guess the meaning of those words based on the contexts or from word parts (P25 *Guess the meaning by searching for the familiar parts of the word*). One participant stated that he/she would memorize words that feel familiar but whose meanings are unknown (P27 *I will memorize words that are familiar to me but whose meanings I don't know*).

Students do not look up all the words they do not know. One participant said that they would choose what to look up/memorize/review based on the frequency of the words. They used COCA or Vocabulary.com to look up the frequency of the words. If the words are too specialized or old-fashioned, they would ignore them. Some participants adopted a combination of strategies. For example, they would skip the unknown words if they do not affect the understanding. If it affects reading, he/she checks the dictionary in time (e.g., P 41 in Excerpt 5).

Excerpt 5:

I will encounter some new words in the article. If it does not affect the reading, I will skip it first and maintain the overall reading feeling. If it affects reading, I will check the dictionary in time. (P41)

Long and complex sentences in expository and argumentative articles are another challenge for EFL learners (e.g., P18, *There are also some complex long and difficult sentence structures that are difficult to be analyzed; P24, I don't know how to analyze a long and difficult sentence.; P42, Some sentences are also very long and difficult to understand*). As for the strategies, students usually try to divide the long sentences into shorter components (e.g., P18), locate the main clause and the subordinate clause (e.g., P24), search for the SVO of the main clause (e.g., P24), or use translation tools (e.g., P27).

The second challenge the participants encountered was related to time. Students had difficulty finding time to read (e.g., P23 *I often give up reading because I don't have a lot of time*), or they had poor time management (e.g., P9 *Sometimes I forget I need to do ER*). To tackle the challenges, the participants took the initiative to adjust themselves or to make remedies. For example, P23 in Excerpt 6 said he/she adjusted their study plan, arranged fixed reading time, and used fragmented time to read. Participant 9 stated that he/she would do a few more articles to make up for what he/she missed during the next reading.

Excerpt 6:

I try to adjust my study plan and arrange fixed reading time. Whether it is my free time in the morning, lunch break, or evening leisure, I will try my best to use the fragmented time to read and maintain continuity and regularity. (P23).

The third challenge was related to the driving force. One participant (P 23 in Excerpt 7) mentioned that due to the amount of school duties, he/she always gave up reading due to lack of time. However, he/she would take the initiative to allocate time to read, and to seek joy and

motivation from reading. This participant also set clear reading goals and set up an award system to inspire him/her to continue reading.

Excerpt 7:

I encountered some difficulties in ER this semester. The biggest problem is the lack of sufficient driving force.I try to find motivation and pleasure in reading. I will choose some topics or fields that interest me to read, such as technological development, cultural history, etc., to make reading more interesting and attractive. In addition, I will also set some specific reading goals and reward mechanisms to motivate myself to keep reading. (P23)

Quizzes at the end of each reading passage also posed challenges to the participants. Sometimes the participants understood the reading, but could not answer the multiple-choice questions correctly (e.g., P 8 *I understand the article, but I can't choose the correct answer*). Participant 24 (Excerpt 8) stated that he/she felt there is more than one correct answer and even though he read the analysis of the correct option, he/she was not convinced.

Excerpt 8:

I feel that multiple options are correct, and I couldn't decide which one is the correct answer. I need to go back to the original text to locate the correct answer; if I made a mistake, I read the analysis. There are several questions that I still feel not convinced after reading the answer analysis. (P24).

One participant mentioned that since the reading passage is long, it was difficult to locate the part where the question was asked, it was easy to get bored, and a random answer was selected. As a result, he did not pass the quiz and his reading level dropped to a lower one.

Participants may encounter more than one challenge. What is revealed from the self-reflection is that the participants were able to empower themselves and try to conquer the difficulties. In the following Excerpt 9, the participant (P52) adopted reading strategies such as skimming and scanning to increase the reading speed, learned new words, and analyzed the parts of a complex sentence. More importantly, the participant got ready mentally and decided not to give up easily in front of the challenges.

Excerpt 9:

I found some of the reading materials to be more difficult than I expected. Some articles in professional fields or esoteric literary works contain vocabulary and sentence structures that are quite unfamiliar to me. Faced with this situation, I will be mentally prepared first and not give up easily because of difficulties. Then I try to guess the meaning of the new word from the contexts, or look up the meanings of the new words. For complex sentence structures, I try to break them down step by step and understand the role and relationship of each part. Sometimes my reading speed suffers. When encountering many new words or complex sentences, it may take me more time to understand them, resulting in a slower reading speed. I try to use speed reading techniques such as skimming and scanning to increase my reading speed. (P52)

Discussion

By implementing ER online for one semester among a group of Chinese EFL learners, this study investigated (a) the effects of ER on English major students' FLE, (b) their bi-weekly reading enjoyment levels and perceptions of the difficulty levels of the reading materials, and the extent to which the two are correlated with each other, and (c) the challenges the English majors encountered while reading online texts, and the strategies learners adopted to tackle them.

The Effect of ER on FLE

FLE, conceptualized within the framework of positive psychology in SLA (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016), represents a multidimensional construct encompassing joy, pleasure, and satisfaction derived from language learning. The main findings of this study were in line with Tabata-Sandom's (2023) study, which suggested that students experienced joy and pleasure in ER programs. While prior studies have identified exogenous sources of FLE—such as teacher rapport, peer interaction, and achievement motivation (Jiang & Dewaele, 2019)—this study posits ER as an endogenous pedagogical intervention capable of fostering intrinsic emotional rewards. The statistically significant enhancement of FLE, with a small to medium effect size (0.293), following a semester of ER aligns with the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), wherein positive emotions broaden learners' cognitive repertoires and build enduring intellectual resources.

The observed elevation in FLE may be theorized through learners' regular engagement with online texts, coupled with comprehension quizzes, likely engendered a sense of mastery (Koné, 2023), reinforcing their belief in their linguistic capabilities. The communal nature of ER activities—shared with peers—resonates with Jiang and Dewaele (2019) that the positive peer interaction experience may be another source that enhances FLE in this study. Furthermore, regular reading for one semester may have enhanced English major students' vocabulary knowledge, grammar knowledge, reading speed, and reading comprehension. Learners in this study look up words they don't know in dictionaries and write them down in their notebooks. They also reread the passages and analyzed long and complex sentences. The explicit and implicit learning behaviors may have improved their language proficiency and made reading easier. This accords with the finding in Zhou and Day's (2021) study where one ESL learner's enjoyment of reading graded readers transferred to a joy of reading other academic texts such as textbooks.

The Interconnections of Reading Enjoyment and Difficulty Level of Reading Materials

The participants in this study on average spent slightly over one hour reading every two weeks on *ReadTheory*. They read 5.4 passages on average on a bi-weekly basis. They generally perceived the reading materials as interesting and enjoyable to read and at appropriate difficulty levels. Perceived reading enjoyment and the difficulty levels of the reading materials were significantly negatively correlated with each other at -0.149 ($p = .036$).

The findings of this study provided implications for the material selections in ER programs. The negative correlation between reading enjoyment and the difficulty level of reading materials

indicated that the more difficult the reading materials are, the less enjoyable the reading experience would be. This finding supports Principle 1 of the 10 ER principles proposed by Day and Bamford (2002). Day and Bamford's (2002) Principle 1 states that "reading material is easy" (p. 137). This principle particularly applies to language learners with low language proficiency (e.g., Nishizawa et al., 2018). By reading materials that are interesting and reflect their language proficiency, learners will enjoy reading and want to read more.

The findings also extended Day and Bamford's (2002) principle on material selection. The reading materials in this study were at appropriate levels for the advanced Chinese EFL learners ($M = 3.121$, $SD = 0.652$). Learners did not find them too easy or too difficult. The perceived enjoyment level was slightly toward "Agree" ($M = 3.91$, $SD = .717$). This indicates that students would feel enjoyment while reading materials that are at appropriate difficulty levels. Previous research shows that to achieve optimal reading experience, reading materials should match readers' reading abilities (e.g., Zhou, 2024). One of the important implications of this study is that advanced readers experienced joy while reading level-appropriate materials. ER teachers may introduce this point to learners in ER orientations to discourage advanced learners from always choosing easy materials and encourage them to select level-appropriate materials. This is important because some learners (e.g., EAP learners in Zhou & Day, 2021) revealed that they always selected easy materials to read, while others called for more challenging materials and teacher guidance in material selections in ER programs.

The findings critique a monolithic application of ER principles, advocating instead for a differentiated approach of considering individual differences in material selection. For advanced learners, texts that balance cognitive demand with linguistic accessibility—neither excessively facile nor impenetrable—optimize affective and cognitive outcomes. This challenges the assumption that enjoyment solely derives from effortless tasks, instead positioning productive struggle as a conduit for satisfaction among proficient learners.

Strategies to Tackle Challenges in ER

The study revealed that though readers perceived reading materials as at appropriate difficulty levels, they still encountered difficulties while reading. The challenges were related mainly to the texts of expository and argumentative genres which contain specialized and unknown vocabulary and long and complex sentences. Learners also had difficulty allocating time, driving themselves to read, and encountering challenges completing the post-reading quizzes.

However, learners adopted a list of strategies such as rereading, translating to their L1 Chinese, looking up words in dictionaries, guessing the meaning of unknown words, and intentionally setting up award mechanisms to tackle the challenges. This was in agreement with the findings of a recent study by Suk (2024) which identified 10 most frequently used ER strategies among 29 L1 Korean EFL learners in a high-beginning level English writing course. The strategies included rereading when necessary, guessing unknown words, skipping words, visualizing the plot, checking and monitoring comprehension, using a dictionary or translator, translating English into L1, adjusting the speed of reading, choosing books carefully, and making predictions.

Moreover, this study revealed that learners' strategy use evolved over time. As they gained experience with ER, learners reported increased confidence and efficiency in their reading strategies. For instance, the decline in perceptions of material difficulty toward the end of the semester suggests that learners' skills had improved, enabling them to tackle more complex texts with less effort. The evolution of strategy uses over time—marked by increased efficiency and confidence—parallels with the possibility that iterative practice cultivates metacognitive refinement in ER.

Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of ER on FLE among Chinese EFL learners with advanced language proficiency over one semester. By examining bi-weekly patterns of reading enjoyment and the difficulty level of reading materials, the findings provide insights into the material selection for advanced readers in ER programs. By delving into the challenges learners faced while reading science articles online and the strategies adopted to tackle them, the study provided valuable insights into the online reading experience of advanced learners, showing that ER is a dynamic interplay of affective, cognitive, and sociocultural factors. ER significantly enhanced learners' FLE, supporting the notion that regular and extensive reading enhances positive emotional experiences in language classrooms. The correlation between reading enjoyment and material difficulty emphasized the importance of tailoring materials to learners' proficiency levels. Additionally, learners demonstrated resilience in addressing challenges, employing strategies such as rereading, translating, using dictionaries, and setting personal goals to overcome obstacles related to vocabulary, sentence complexity, time management, and lack of driving force.

These findings have broader implications for ER implementation in EFL contexts, suggesting that well-structured ER programs can foster both emotional and linguistic growth. ER practitioners should provide sufficient orientation, monitor students' progress, and offer support to help students effectively navigate reading obstacles posed by reading challenging expository and argumentative texts online. However, there are some limitations to be noted in the present study. This study only focused on advanced learners. Future research can examine the effects of ER on learners of other proficiency levels. Future research could also extend the scope of this study by exploring the long-term effects of ER on FLE and examining the sources of FLE. Ultimately, ER not only contributes to language proficiency but also cultivates a positive emotional connection with language learning, making it a valuable component of language education.

Notes

1. There are 56 ethnic groups in China.

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Appendix A. Reading Record Form

1. 姓名
2. 这两周你阅读了多长时间? (分钟)
3. 这周你读了几篇文章? (篇)
4. 我喜欢我阅读的内容
完全同意 () 同意 () 一般同意 () 不同意 () 完全不同意 ()
5. 描述一下你阅读的内容 (中英文均可), 学到了什么, 比如知识、词汇、语法等。
6. 我这两周阅读的文章难度。
非常容易 () 容易 () 合适 () 难 ()
非常难 ()

Appendix B. ER Activities and Descriptions

Week	ER activities	Description
2	Vocabulary	Students were asked to prepare 10 words that they learned from their ER reading that week, provide the definitions, synonyms, and one or two example sentences. Students were also asked to prepare a fill-in-the-blanks activity (5 sentences) using the words you provided.
4	Grammar detective	Students were asked to select three sentences from the readings they've done, change each sentence so that there is one mistake in it, and write them on the activity sheet. They can add a word, delete a word, or replace a word with another word. They need to make sure that there is ONLY ONE MISTAKE in each sentence. Their classmates would act as grammar detectives to find and correct the mistakes in the sentences.
6	Drawing	Students were asked to draw a picture based on the content of the readings, provide a description of the drawing, describe what they have learned from the reading, and their reactions to the reading.
8	Gifts	Students were asked to choose two characters from the readings, decide what gifts to give them and explain the reasons.
10	Alternative ending	Students were asked to choose two characters from the readings, decide what gifts to give them and explain the reasons.
12	Why should (not) you read this article	Students were asked to select one reading and record a short video of 1 minute to summarize the reading and provide two reasons why their classmates should (not) read it
14	What I learned	Students were asked to list five new words, explain what they learned about the world, or about a specific place or person, the difficulties they encountered in reading, and how they felt about their English after reading online that week.
16	Cloze test	Students were asked to adopt or adapt 1 to 2 paragraphs from a reading, prepare a cloze test with 5 blanks and 8 options, and ask their classmates to complete the test.
17	Final reflection	Students were asked to write a reflection on their reading experience in Chinese and English, their experience reading on Readtheory.com this semester, the difficulties they encountered, the linguistic and affective benefits of ER, and their suggestions to future ER program

Appendix C. Final Reflection

反思

我们这一学期的泛读即将结束，请大家用中文回答下面的问题，完成这学期泛读活动的反思。反思不能少于1000字。

- (1) 请描述你母语阅读的经历。你喜欢阅读中文吗？为什么喜欢或者不喜欢？
- (2) 请描述你这学期以前的英文阅读习惯，比如你原来的英文阅读课是怎么上的？你的感受是什么？
- (3) 请描述一下你这学期的泛读，比如你每周阅读多少篇？什么时候阅读？在哪里阅读？等。
- (4) 这学期在 **ReadTheory** 网站上你主要阅读了哪些类型的文章？你喜欢不喜欢这些文章？为什么？
- (5) 请描述让你印象深刻的一篇文章。
- (6) 你觉得这学期通过泛读，对你的语言水平（比如词汇、语法、阅读速度、阅读理解、总体语言水平）哪些方面产生了影响？可以举具体的例子。
- (7) 你觉得这学期通过泛读，对你的语言学习情感、动机、态度（比如阅读态度、阅读动机、愉悦、焦虑）哪些方面产生了影响？可以举具体的例子。
- (8) 你觉得这学期的泛读活动，比如 **vocabulary**、**drawing**、**what I learned**、**cloze test**、**grammar detective** 等，你最喜欢哪一个/哪一类型的活动？为什么？
- (9) 你对每周的泛读分享的看法是什么？为什么？
- (10) 你觉得这学期的泛读遇到了什么困难？你如何解决这些问题？
- (11) 你对未来学期的泛读和泛读活动有什么建议和意见？