

## EXTENSIVE READING AND ITS IMPACT ON LEARNER AUTONOMY: A STUDY ON 1<sup>st</sup> YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS AT A VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract.** This study was conducted to examine the potential impacts of extensive reading on learner autonomy of first year English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at the Faculty of Foreign Languages (FFL), Hanoi Pedagogical University No.2 (HPU2), Vietnam. The findings showed that extensive reading could help the majority of students enhance their autonomous learning, reflecting in the improvement in students' abilities of 1) making decision, 2) setting up the purposes for the activities, 3) allocating time for the activities, 4) applying into other activities and 5) making self-evaluation. There was also an increase in their reading speed. Moreover, extensive reading helped students to build up positive attitudes towards reading activities. Nonetheless, the students encountered some difficulties such as how to spend time effectively and to choose the readable texts. Therefore, to develop students' autonomy, the teachers should raise students' awareness, create supportive learning environments, and integrate extensive reading into the teaching activities properly.

**Keywords:** extensive reading, learner autonomy, EFL, Vietnam.

### 1. Introduction

Extensive reading has long been a familiar term in the field of language learning. The term was first mentioned by Harold Palmer in 1968 when he compared it to intensive reading. In his view, extensive reading refers to a way of reading many books one after each other in a fast speed, in which the readers focus on the general understanding and the meaning of the text rather than the language or skills (Sheu, 2004). Other researchers share the same definition of extensive reading with Palmer, for example, (Bamford & Day 1997, Iwahori, 2008, Krashen, 1993, Mikulecky, 1990). They all have agreed on the common features of extensive reading: a) the connection to a great variety of reading materials; b) the chance of reading a large number of texts; c) the freedom to select whatever books to read; d) the ability to read at individual speed; e) the pressure-free environment; and f) the opportunity to practice real-life reading. (Bamford 1984, Bamford & Day, 2004, Hedge, 2000).

Learner autonomy (LA) is considered important in the process of learning. The most popular definition of learner autonomy is by Holec which is "learners' ability to take charge or control of their own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 12). Little defines language learning autonomy via its dependent relationship with the development and exercise of a capacity for critical reflection,

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decision making and independent action (Little, 2000). Such common words *ability*, *capacity*, and *responsibility* are generally referred to when denoting typical features of learner autonomy: the independence and the self-regulation of learners.

## **2. Content**

### **2.1. Context and Motivation**

Research shows that extensive reading and learner autonomy have a positive correlational relationship (Takase, 2008). This is because extensive reading encourages the autonomous learning of a language learner, changes their learning habits, and promotes learner's learning motivations (Alvarez 2012, Cha 2009, İnceçay, İnceçay & Mede 2013, Lake & Holster, 2014, Lee, Schallert & Kim 2015, Takase 2008, Yamashita 2013, 2015). In spite of this, it is not clear that their findings could be applicable to Vietnamese contexts without further research because of the following reasons. Firstly, all the aforementioned research has been implemented in the contexts of many other countries and with the learners who have different characteristics from Vietnamese learners, with different cultural features, different traditions and practice of teaching and learning. Secondly, these studies seem to focus more on the attitudes and motivations of the learners via the teacher's evaluation rather than digging deeply into the changes in learner autonomy as evaluated by the learners themselves.

In the specific context of the Faculty of Foreign Languages (FFL) at the Hanoi Pedagogical University Number 2 (HPU2), Vietnam, English major students' self-studies have always been emphasized in the syllabus. This is reflected in the amount of time allocated for their self-studies and practice, which is often twice or three times as much as the theoretical sessions in class. However, it was observed that students did not make the best use of those times. They hardly prepared lessons before coming to class. In class, the responses that teachers often received when asking students whether they had prepared the lesson at home or not was silence from students. The students seldom showed their responsibilities for their learning and hardly came up with any ideas for their learning's purposes. What they did most of the time in the class was waiting for their teachers' instruction. In the reading class, when the teacher asked the students what they thought they had achieved in their previous lessons, the students could not give any answers for that. It seemed all these things showed the need to develop learner autonomy for the students, especially in reading.

As there has been little research on this topic, and considering the need to improve autonomy of HPU2 English majors, the researchers conducted the study to explore the potential impacts of extensive reading on enhancing the autonomous learning of first year English majors at the university. Specifically, the study addressed the following research question: To what extent can extensive reading help to foster the learner autonomy amongst 1<sup>st</sup> year English major students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages in the Hanoi Pedagogical University No.2, Vietnam?

### **2.2. Research Design and Procedures**

#### **2.2.1. Research procedures**

The study was carried out in the context of two English classes in the Foreign Language Faculty of the Hanoi Pedagogical University No.2 (HPU2). The Foreign Language Faculty (FLF) in the HPU2 is a relatively new faculty because it was founded about 10 years ago. Graduates from this faculty of the university could teach English at pre-school, primary, secondary and high school or becoming translators and interpreters.

The purpose of the study was to investigate if the use of extensive reading could enhance learner autonomy; therefore, the chosen methodology, action research, was a rational choice. The model of action research by Burns (2010) was adapted for the research project, which included 4 steps such as problem confirmation, planning, action, and reflection.

The research project lasted for eight weeks in the second semester of the 2017 school year, with the participation of twelve first-year students. Among twelve participants, nine of them had been studying English continuously for twelve years from primary level to high school. The three others had just studied English for three years at high school. However, they all passed the entrance examination and the English diagnostic test for the freshmen at FLF, HPU2. At the time they joined the study, their English level was supposed to be at intermediate level and they had been studying for one semester (for 15 weeks) with twelve periods per week for all four macro English skills at FLF, HPU2.

### **2.2.2. Data collection and analysis**

First, to confirm the problem of a lack of learner autonomy, an online questionnaire was administered. Twelve participants answered this questionnaire, which was adapted from Tamrackitkun (2010). The questionnaire was divided in two main parts. The first part consisting of 15 questions aimed at confirming that whether the students had experience of extensive reading or not. The second part was the more important one with 12 questions designed to find out whether the students had autonomy in their learning. The online questionnaire was sent to students' emails to collect the required data. This was done as a way to avoid the possible pressure of teacher-student power relationship, which might affect the students' answers. Furthermore, to help students avoid misunderstanding the questionnaires, a pilot survey was conducted with the help of five students. These students were asked to comment on the language, the content of the questionnaire to see if there were any vague points. After the pilot, as the English version made the students misunderstand some questions such as question number 14, question number 18 and question number 27, the questionnaire was made bilingual: English and Vietnamese for students' better understanding.

Second, the step of planning involved drafting an action plan for the research study, and designing data collection instruments including students' weekly journals and focus group interviews. Detailed information on data collection instruments design and administration can be found in the next paragraph.

Third, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> week to 7<sup>th</sup> week, an action plan was implemented. To start with, the students joined a home extensive reading activity from week 2 to week 7. The materials were mainly taken from the Oxford Bookworm Library and the list of Graded Readers compiled by Paul Nation ranging from level one to level three with the length of head words ranging from 400 to 3000 words. During their time of reading, if they had any problems with their reading choice, the students might change their reading materials. Moreover, their opinions about the difficulty level of the materials were collected in order to eliminate the too-hard-to-read materials which later were replaced with those that fitted participants' reading level. At the end, the selected reading materials for the participants were the combination of the list of Graded Readers by Paul Nation, 100 Illustrated Stories by Usborne Books, and the Oxford Bookworm Library. At the same time, the students were asked to keep the weekly journals to reflect their experience on reading extensively as well as the impacts of extensive reading on their autonomous reading. To help students know what they would do with extensive reading and journal keeping, at week 2, the concepts and principles of keeping the weekly journal as well as doing extensive reading were explained for the students. Furthermore, the participants were asked to keep the semi-structured journals with nine guided questions. The guided questions

were designed under the five-level model of learner autonomy which includes awareness; decision making; task modifying/adaptation; task creation; and becoming teachers and researchers (Nunan, 1997). Five students were selected to join the focus group interview following convenient sampling strategy (Mertens, 2005). The interview aimed at investigating the participants' attitudes towards their enhanced autonomy.

Questionnaire data were then analyzed by the Excel software, and data from journals and focus group interview were thematically coded (Richards, 2005).

## **2.3. Findings**

Data from the questionnaire confirmed the problem of lack of learner autonomy and of extensive reading experience, thus providing a need for conducting the research project. While the extensive reading program was being conducted, data was collected by means of student journals and a focus group interview. These data show the improvement of learner autonomy via the practice of extensive reading. The sections that follow will detail these findings.

### **2.3.1. Questionnaire findings that confirm a lack of learner autonomy and of experience in extensive reading**

#### ***2.3.1.1. A lack of Learner Autonomy***

Questionnaire data indicated that there was a lack of learner autonomy among students in their learning, especially reading. In general, the students did not have a positive evaluation of their own learning. They also expressed their weaknesses in self-learning as well as their dependence on teacher's instructions during the learning process. Firstly, in response to question number 1, number 2, and number 3 on general learning evaluation, the majority of the students (10 students out of 12) were not confident of their ability in reading, making and setting up reading goals and in managing the time for reading. Secondly, when being asked about their self-reading, only 4 participants often read in advance, while 8 of them sometimes or seldom did that. Moreover, 7 students had poor frequency of practicing at home, finding more texts to read at home from the Internet, and discussing the lesson with friends and teacher. In regard to the dependence on teachers, 9 out of 12 students often or always read teacher-provided materials, while only 3 read the materials prepared by themselves.

#### ***2.3.1.2. A lack of experience in extensive reading***

Data from questionnaire also suggested the problem of students' little experience in extensive reading. It was revealed that students seldom read extensively in the learning process. Generally, despite the fact that the participants were well aware of reading importance, they had passive attitudes towards reading and little experience with the activity of extensive reading.

The students showed their awareness of the significance of reading. They appraised such strengths of reading as broadening the knowledge, developing proficiency, enlarging vocabulary (from 5 to 8 out of 12 students chose the option Yes and Absolutely Yes for questions from 1 to 7). Nevertheless, students' passive attitudes and inexperience of extensive reading were also expressed. It can be seen that out of 12 students, 9 disagreed that they had responsibility for finding their own learning way. In addition, all participants dissented from the idea that they could read well without teachers' help. Moreover, 10 participants revealed that they did not often read at home when they were not required. Only 4 claimed that they were interested in being able to read English texts for studying in other fields.

### **2.3.2. The Self- Reported Influences of Extensive Reading on Learner Autonomy**

To reiterate, an online questionnaire was administered to the students, through which a lack of learner autonomy was confirmed. Then an action plan on extensive reading activities was

designed and applied to students in 8 weeks. During this time, the students were asked to keep a weekly journal, and at the end of the action, they took part in a focus group interview.

Data from students' journals and focus group interview showed that extensive reading seemed to have impacts on students' autonomy. This was reflected in such aspects as 1) the ability of making decision; 2) the ability of setting up the purposes for the reading activity; 3) the ability of allocating time for implementing the activity; 4) the ability of applying what they have learnt into other activities; and 5) the ability of making self-evaluation. The following sections detail these findings.

#### ***2.3.2.1. Students could make their own decision of selecting the materials for reading extensively***

Findings from journals show that, by practicing extensive reading, ten out of 12 participants learnt the way to make decision for their reading activity gradually. When they had to make decision on selecting the materials, the students often did it with serious considerations and investigation, as reflected by Student 2:

I chose to read the story *A Christmas Carol* because the story has an adequate length for me to read with 5 chapters in 45 pages. Moreover, this is a very interesting story written by Charles Dickens, a famous writer whom I have read his work at high school time. I found the brief summary of the story on the Internet and I thought it is interesting, so I decided to read the whole story. (S2\_W2)

Data from the focus group interview confirmed the evidence of learner autonomy improvement via the ability of making decision. Selecting the materials by themselves all the time, students gradually learnt the way to consider such factors related to the texts as the length, the introduction of the story before deciding on what to read. They could also improve their skimming skill in reading text. This was clearly shown in the comment of Student 8 below.

At first, I choose the story randomly or to follow my friend's choice. However, I find it sometimes very boring and it is not my taste so it is really hard to read them. Therefore, after the first week, I spend some times to look at the short introduction for each story before I read, and I also look at the length of the story. Then I will make up my mind on choosing what to read. It is funny, I think my skimming skill has become better as I practice looking through the story many times before reading. (S8)

#### ***2.3.2.2. Students could set up the purposes for doing extensive reading***

Another aspect of learner autonomy, the ability of establishing the goals for their activity, was improved when students did extensive reading activities. There was a variety of reading goals mentioned by the participants in their journals such as learning new words, new structures, the culture in the texts, or just reading for pleasure. Data from the weekly journals written by the students showed this aspect.

I read *A ghost in Love* and other plays to learn new words related to the topic of ghost and love. I wanted to find many new words to learn and to use in speaking lesson. These words and structures are witch, court, trial, check-in desk, How do you know?, How can you know?, Oh, come on! (S12\_Journal\_W4)

When I read the introduction about the story *The Meaning of Gifts*, I was attracted by the concise but meaningful lines, so I decided to read the story just for pleasure and to check whether my first impression of the story was right or wrong. (S11\_Journal\_W5)

#### ***2.3.2.3. Students could arrange time to do extensive reading effectively***

Data from both journals and focus group interview demonstrated that students could have better time allocation for reading extensively. By carrying out the extensive reading activities, the participants gradually learnt to the way to allocate time effectively and scientifically to finish the tasks they established.

I read the story from 9 p.m. to 11 p.m. each day. This is the time after I have finished doing all the required tasks for the next day and before I go to bed. At this time, I also find that it is effective for reading the story because I can concentrate on it without disruption. (S1\_Journal\_W3)

I think I have managed my time better since I do extensive reading and keep the journals, because I set up the goal for my activity at the beginning of the week, so I always try to achieve it. This makes me work harder than usual but when I can achieve the goal, I feel satisfied. And I can see that I can arrange the time better and I can also focus on my activity better. The time I spend on reading the text is shorter than before but I can still understand the meaning of the text. (S1\_ Focus group interview)

#### **2.3.2.4. *Students could apply what they have learnt from the texts into other situations***

Students' journals demonstrated their effort of applying what they read and learnt from the text to other situations such as drama clubs, other lessons, daily communication with friends, as indicated below:

I read the story and I found that I had learnt more than just the pleasure of reading. From four stories, I learnt about the way people dealt with many other social relationships as well as the things that might trouble other but we might not realize that. It urged me to look back at myself and the way I interact with people around me to evaluate my living style again. (S11\_Journal\_W4)

This week I have learnt some new words from the story *The Mutiny on the Bounty* such as voyage (a long journey by ship), mutiny (the act of the sailors to fight the captain on a ship and take control of that ship). I also have known some interesting structures .... I found it very interesting to use with my friends outside the class time. We kept changing the words like hell to heaven and dead to lovely to talk to each other, and that was really fun! (S5\_Journal\_W5)

#### **2.3.2.5. *Students could evaluate whether they have become better and more independent reader***

Data collected from both journals and focus group interview indicated that participants demonstrated their ability of self-evaluation in many aspects such as achieving the targets, improving the skills, and becoming a better and independent reader.

I set up 2 targets when reading that are applying what I have learnt into other situations and making a brief summary about the text in 100 words. I am contented that I have achieved these targets because I have used the words, I learnt into my speaking lesson and my summaries for the stories can be understood by my friends (S1\_Journal\_W3).

I am not confident to say that I am a better reader now, as I think I am still far from the standards of a good reader, and because I think the texts, I choose to read are the easy ones. I am not really confident to say that I can read every text as fluently as reading those... However, I think if I keep practicing, I can become a good reader someday.... I have been more independent, for the fact that I can evaluate and choose the reading material myself now, I do not only depend on the teacher's instructions as before (S4\_Focus group interview).

My target when reading the story is to improve my reading skills. To achieve my target, I read the story twice to find the new words, new structures. I read slowly for each detail. Then I

think my reading skills have been improved. I have understood the content according to the context of the text and the author's purpose to the text. (S12\_Journal\_W6)

In a nutshell, data from the journals and the focus group interview show the influences on learner autonomy of extensive reading among the participants as the collected data demonstrated the improvement of the students on such ability as 1) making decision; 2) setting up the purposes for the reading activity; 3) allocating time for implementing the activity; 4) applying what they have learnt into other activities; and 5) making self-evaluation. This is in lines with (Little, 1991, Nation, 2015, Yamashita, 2015) when they conclude that extensive reading is an approach that value learner autonomy, help the learner to become a more flexible, fluent, motivated and reflective learner, who can make their own evaluation about what, where, when and how they read. In order to read extensively and keep their experience with the activity, the students learnt the way to make plan for their activities and also the way to finish it within the deadline designed by themselves. This action, being intentional or unintentional, over the time, might also help to create a habit of making plan and managing the time for students, which was very useful for their learning process.

### **2.3.3. The increase in students' reading speed**

Data collected generally indicated that practicing extensive reading helped participants to foster their reading speed, especially if the selected stories were attractive to the readers. Among all participants, Student number 2 (S2) finished reading the list of graded readers before the research project ended. She even asked the researcher whether the researcher could provide more materials for her to read. For other students, the number of books read in one week increased over time, ranging from at least half of the story to 6 stories at most. Take the journal of Student number 9 for instance. In week 2, she could only read a half of the story:

Because of the length of the story (*Animals in Danger*), this week I can only read the half of the story. But then at week 6, the number of stories read increased (S9\_Journal\_W2). This week, I have read three stories so far. (S9\_Journal\_W6)

### **2.3.4. The Attitudes of students towards extensive reading**

Data from students' journals and focus group demonstrated quite positive attitudes from the participants towards the practice of extensive reading. The positive attitudes of the students were illustrated via their appreciation of the benefits of extensive reading such as providing a relaxing learning environment, improving knowledge and skills, increasing the reading speed; and the most important thing, fostering their learner autonomy.

Firstly, the students highly appreciated the positive effects of extensive reading on providing a relaxing and comfortable environment for reading. It seemed that the participants really enjoyed the space and the freedom extensive reading provided, which was different from the normal reading activities in class.

Reading this story makes me relaxed and comfortable when I am under pressure. It helps me to forget my learning stress when I fall into the story. (S8\_Journal\_W6)

Secondly, the students also mentioned the effectiveness of extensive reading on improving their knowledge, reading skills and reading ability.

I think that what I learnt from this story is very interesting and helpful and I can use them in speaking and writing. (S4\_Journal\_W6)

I think my reading skill can be improved if I continue reading for a longer time because I can collect many new things that I do not have in my regular reading practice in class. (S11\_Journal\_W7)

Thirdly, extensive reading proved to be beneficial in increasing the reading speed for the students, which was shown by the increase number of books read from week to week.

This week, I have read 5 books so far. I read faster and faster every day. (S2\_Journal\_W5)

Besides proving its influences on learner autonomy, extensive reading also received quite constructive attitudes from the participants. Data showed the positive change in most students' attitudes towards the activity of reading extensively. For some students, they kept the positive attitudes towards the activity from the beginning till the end, and through that, sharpening their reading ability as well as enhancing their autonomous learning. Some other students resisted with the activity at first, but then changed their attitudes and enjoyed the activity enthusiastically. Therefore, at the end of the research project, they gained considerable improvement in both their reading competence and attitudes. Rather than passively doing the activity, students became more active and more interested in doing their tasks, which is in line with the findings of (Fujita & Noro, 2009, Fujigaki, 2012, Yamashita 2013). This confirms the benefits of extensive reading on learners' autonomy in terms of activeness and interests. In addition, extensive reading was found to encourage the students to read more, benefit them with its strengths in learning reading and as a result, develop the love and habits of reading for most of them. This finding is similar to the research results of many studies of (Ahmad & Asraf, 2003, Cha, 2009, Chien & Yu 2015, Takase, 2008). This shows that extensive reading had strengths in developing positive attitudes towards the learning activity.

### **2.3.5. The difficulties when reading extensively**

Despite the strengths of extensive reading, there were still things that restrained the students from reading extensively in a smooth way, which were listed out by the students such as their inexperience with extensive reading at the beginning; the difficulties in time allocation; and the difficulties in choosing the suitable texts to read at their level, as mentioned below.

As my friends and I have never done extensive reading before, it was difficult for us to know the way to do it at the first time. I have trouble with choosing the texts at first week and I have to ask the teacher for advice. As she said that I could choose whatever I want to read, and I do not need to limit myself on choosing only the story related to the topic we study in class that week, it was easier to make my decision. (S4)

In brief, the difficulties that the students faced during the research such as their inexperience with extensive reading; the difficulties in time allocation; and the difficulties in choosing the suitable texts to read at their level were described in data from the journals and focus group.

## **3. Reflection Conclusions**

Extensive reading and learner autonomy have long been the focus of researchers in the field of language learning and teaching. This study has investigated how extensive reading influenced the learner autonomy of 12 EFL learners in FFL, HPU2. The results of the action research study showed that extensive reading had positive effects on fostering learner autonomy and changing the attitudes towards reading among the students despite some challenges. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers can exploit the strengths of extensive reading in teaching and learning in order to help students to develop the learning autonomy and enhance the positive attitudes towards reading activity by using it as the supplementary activity beside classroom activity. The study adds to the literature by confirming the benefits of extensive reading on learner autonomy. To overcome the difficulties that learners might encounter, such as time allocation, finding the readable texts, there should be a clear and detailed guide from



teachers or the experienced readers for the students who have little or no experience on extensive reading.

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