

The Power of Extensive Reading in Improving Students' Vocabulary and Reading Skills

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Abstract

This study reports on an Exploratory Action Research (EAR) project that investigated the use of extensive reading (ER) as a pedagogical approach to support English language learning among teenagers in a state school in Andijan City, Uzbekistan. Departing from Day and Bamford's classical model, this study implemented a 'Modified' ER with 'Class Reading' elements. This approach emphasised the provision of level-appropriate reading materials and opportunities for students to freely choose texts to increase their engagement through collaborative discussions and reflective blogging. This pedagogical initiative, introduced gradually with the help of EAR, proved the value of ER for students' vocabulary expansion and reading comprehension, as well as for their confidence and motivation to read for pleasure. Overall, ER is most effective when supported by access to a wide range of reading materials, combined with structured opportunities for reflection, collaborative sharing, and independent reading beyond the classroom.

Introduction

Extensive reading (ER) is a widely recognised and powerful learning tool in first, second and foreign language learning. ER has been variably defined, but it is often associated with Day and Bamford's (2002) "Ten principles" for successful ER programmes. These principles emphasise that ER should be engaging, easy, fast, silent and self-selected with a primary purpose of information or pleasure (Day & Bamford, 2002; Robb & Ewert, 2024).

Many studies highlighted the benefits of ER on students' language development. Hardy and Rodrigo (2025) highlight that ER can greatly contribute to language proficiency, namely vocabulary and grammar acquisition, spelling, as well as reading fluency and reading

comprehension. Suk (2017) found that students who had consistent exposure to ER, particularly graded reading, over time demonstrated clear improvements in reading comprehension, reading speed, and, most importantly, vocabulary acquisition.

In addition, according to Hardy and Rodrigo (2025), there are affective and cognitive benefits of ER for language learners. Affective gains include developing positive attitudes toward reading, fostering love for books, and cultivating long-term reading habits. Cognitive benefits, on the other hand, include delaying cognitive decline and preserving cognitive functions.

Although ER has been much investigated and its benefits for language proficiency are well documented, it is still not commonly practiced in EFL (English as a foreign language) settings (Jeon & Day, 2016), particularly school settings. There could be many reasons for this: teachers' reluctance, prioritising intensive reading-only instruction in the school programmes, limited exposure to a variety of texts, students' low proficiency levels (Hardy & Rodrigo, 2025; Macalister, 2010). Suk (2017) also outlined other challenges of introducing ER in the classroom. One of the most significant challenges is the mismatch between the vocabulary explicitly taught in regular lessons and the words that students encounter in graded readers. This gap can cause frustration, as learners may feel unprepared to deal with unfamiliar words, which can reduce their motivation to read. To address this, teachers are encouraged to carefully select reading materials that match students' proficiency levels and to provide sufficient pre-reading or vocabulary-building support to help learners approach the texts with confidence.

Therefore, Suk (2017) recommends selecting materials that align with learners' proficiency and interests while also ensuring that assessments reflect the words students encounter through reading. Reading materials that include graded readers, simplified short adventure and detective stories, and illustrated books with controlled vocabulary can enhance students' reading fluency and foster more positive attitudes toward reading in the EFL and secondary school context.

To explore how to engage secondary school students in extensive reading, I, Ugilkhon Kakilova, together with my mentor Elyanora Menglieva, implemented an EAR project. The main goal of this project was to help students who struggled with vocabulary development and had limited access to reading materials. We wanted to develop school students' reading fluency through ER. As part of this project, several interventions were successfully implemented, including ER sessions integrated into regular lessons and extracurricular activities.

Methods

Research Context

I conducted my research project in my own classroom at the specialised secondary school No. 14, located in the Andijan region of Uzbekistan. This type of school is for the gifted children who pass entry school exams. In this school, students' exposure to reading materials was generally limited to short passages from the textbook, and opportunities to engage with longer, more diverse texts were very rare. Reading for pleasure was not a common practice, and many students associated reading in English only with exam preparation or completing homework tasks.

Research Aims and Questions

The primary aim of this research project was to understand how ER can support students' reading comprehension and vocabulary development, and to reflect on the challenges and successes of integrating this intervention into an EFL classroom. The project also aims to initially explore my own perceptions and actions on the ways of engaging students in ER in the classroom. The following research questions guided this study:

Table 1.
Set of exploratory research questions with aims

Research questions	Aim of research question
1. <i>Why do I believe ER improves students' reading comprehension and vocabulary?</i>	Explore my own perceptions on the use of ER
2. <i>What are the challenges of implementing ER in my classroom?</i>	Explore my own perceptions on considering challenges in implementing ER
3. <i>What do my students enjoy about ER sessions?</i>	Explore others' perceptions to understand students' needs and interests
4. <i>What strategies do I use to motivate student participation in ER?</i>	Explore my teacher behaviour to understand how I teach ER
5. <i>How does ER contribute to student progress based on their assignments and test results?</i>	Explore students' performance
6. <i>What do my students say about ER-integrated classes and how do they perceive their impact on vocabulary growth and reading comprehension?</i>	Evaluate the impact of ER on aspects of language proficiency (action step)
7. <i>Did students demonstrate measurable improvement in these areas as a result of participation in ER activities?</i>	Evaluate the impact of ER on aspects of language proficiency (action step)

Participants

The participants of this study were my 9th-grade students. The students are teenagers (aged 14-15), whose first language is Uzbek and who are studying English as a foreign language. Most of them struggle with reading comprehension, especially when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary and longer texts. Their prior experience with reading English has been limited to short texts, and they have had little exposure to graded readers or authentic reading materials. This made them suitable participants for exploring how ER could support their vocabulary development and overall reading comprehension.

Research approach

The main research approach in this study is EAR. According to Smith (2015), EAR, as a gradualist and grounded approach that was developed as a form of teacher-research in difficult circumstances, encourages teachers

to engage in research-based exploration of issues arising in their classrooms via means which do not interfere with their everyday teaching, rather than immediately plunging into action and attempting measurement of change (p. 39).

Being involved in the EAR mentoring initiative by the Network of English Teacher-Researchers in Uzbekistan, I employed this approach to explore the teaching problem and embed ER as a pedagogical practice in the school context. The following sections describe each of the EAR steps that were completed during this project.

Exploration phase

The problem in the classroom was initially identified through multiple sources of evidence. At the beginning of the school year, observations during daily lessons indicated that many 9th-grade students struggled with reading. When longer texts were introduced, students often paused due to difficulty understanding unfamiliar vocabulary. Motivation to continue reading tended to decrease when challenges were encountered.

To explore this issue more systematically, teacher reflection notes were kept after each reading lesson. These notes documented which parts of the texts were difficult for students, their reactions to new vocabulary, and the level of engagement during tasks. This provided insight into the effectiveness of my instructional strategies. Based on my reflections, I noticed a consistent pattern: students were confident with short textbook passages but faced difficulties when reading longer stories or graded readers.

In addition, a colleague acting as a critical friend observed several of my lessons and wrote notes about how students engaged with the reading tasks. This provided an objective perspective and helped me see things I could have missed. Her observation notes confirmed that students avoided reading aloud, lost focus during silent reading, and often asked for word translations instead of trying to guess meaning from context. This helped me realise that the challenge was not limited to vocabulary but also included a lack of reading strategies.

A short survey was administered to students to explore their reading habits, preferences, and attitudes toward reading in English. The results indicated that most students rarely engaged in reading English texts outside of class. Approximately one third reported enjoying reading in their mother tongue but described English texts as “too difficult” or “boring.” These responses provided further evidence that limited vocabulary and minimal exposure to engaging reading materials were significant obstacles to developing reading proficiency.

Taken together, these observations, reflections, critical friend notes, and survey results helped me clearly identify the core problem: my students had limited vocabulary knowledge and very little experience with ER, which restricted the development of their reading comprehension and overall language proficiency.

Action phase

After analysing all data collected during the exploratory phase, the research progressed to the Action phase. After comparing my exploratory findings with the literature, I decided to adopt Day & Bamford’s (2002) five principles for the successful implementation of the ER programme:

- the availability of materials suited to students’ proficiency levels and interests,
- opportunities for students to freely choose and read as many materials as they wish,
- access to a wide variety of reading materials across different topics,
- understanding that reading should be an individual and silent activity,
- teacher is orienting and guiding their students.

Besides, other important dimensions of ER were considered, including the location where pleasure reading took place, the agent responsible for selecting the text, and the availability of supplementary activities related to reading (Waring & McLean, 2015). The main reasons for not being able to implement all the principles was the curriculum limitations and time management.

Interventions: Considering the principles of ER and exploratory findings, I decided to implement three main interventions over the period of two months:

- (1) I provided a wide variety of accessible reading materials, primarily graded readers, according to students' proficiency levels, linguistic competence, interests, as well as curriculum requirements for acquiring textbook-specific lexical units. This curated approach allowed students to read independently with minimal frustration while remaining engaged and motivated, ensuring necessary vocabulary attainment.
- (2) Regular silent reading sessions were organised as part of extra-curriculum activities to support the development of sustained reading habits among students. To make this experience more interactive and meaningful, students were encouraged to share their reading experiences during the Readers' Club meetings and through supplementary classroom activities. These activities included role-plays based on the characters, group discussions about the plot, debates on key themes, and writing short summaries or reflections on each chapter. Such activities were designed not only to deepen comprehension but also to create a collaborative and supportive reading culture where learners could express their ideas, ask questions, and motivate each other to continue reading.
- (3) Continuous reflection on teaching practice was conducted, and interventions were adjusted as necessary. Data from a reflective journal, a student-readers' blog, post-lesson surveys, and test results were used to identify effective strategies and areas for improvement. Observations indicated that students participated more actively and engaged more deeply in both regular reading classes and Readers' Club sessions. Activities were modified to allow greater opportunities for peer discussion, enabling students to share short summaries, discuss new vocabulary, and reflect on their reading experiences collaboratively.

These combined interventions highlighted the critical need to create a richer reading environment where students could access engaging, level-appropriate texts and develop positive reading habits.

Data analysis

All the qualitative data collected from my own reflections and my critical friend's observation notes were analysed thematically at the exploratory and action cycles of this project. The themes have been outlined in the further sections. The data analysis for the surveys was performed via Excel, and descriptive statistical information was generated.

Results and Discussion

Exploratory phase findings

The exploratory phase of this research revealed challenges and opportunities in implementing ER with 9th-grade EFL learners in Uzbekistan. I explored this teaching challenge from three perspectives: my own teacher perceptions, students' perceptions, and my behaviour in the classroom.

From my perspective as a teacher, I identified three main challenges in integrating ER into the classroom. First, students had a very limited access to reading materials that were appropriate for their proficiency level; many of the available texts contained vocabulary beyond their current knowledge, making sustained reading difficult both at home and at school. This aligns with Suk's (2017) finding that mismatches between classroom vocabulary and words in graded readers can reduce the effectiveness of ER. Second, the school curriculum allocated very little time for reading activities, resulting in limited opportunities for extended practice during lessons. Finally, variations in student motivation and reading ability were observed. While some students engaged enthusiastically with reading tasks, others struggled or displayed lower interest, creating challenges for ensuring balanced participation.

I conducted a survey to explore students' perceptions. Findings showed a complex but, overall, more positive attitudes towards reading. The data (see Table 2) showed that half of the students recognised reading as a useful activity for vocabulary development and outlined their preferences for certain genres that could be included to the ER programme. However, that fact that 35% of students still did not enjoy reading outside the classroom suggested a challenge to overcome: developing students' autonomous habits for pleasure reading. These findings highlight the importance of offering students the freedom to choose texts that match their interests, a point that has been repeatedly emphasised in previous studies on ER (Day & Bamford, 2002; Suk, 2017).

Table 2.
Students' perceptions of ER (survey results)

Survey item	% of students	Interpretation
Reading helps to improve vocabulary	50%	Students saw clear benefits for vocabulary growth
Do not enjoy reading outside the classroom	35%	Reading is still not a pleasurable habit for some students
Enjoy specific genres (adventure, detective, fantasy)	65%	Choice of genre motivates students and increases engagement

The recommendations of my colleague, who observed my lessons, also pointed to several practical improvements. For instance, my colleague noted during a personal conversation that "students seemed more engaged when they were asked open-ended questions about the story". She suggested allocating more time for group discussions to allow quieter students to express their opinions. Also, there was another point worth considering from the observation: having discussions primarily in English with occasional use of Uzbek for clarification could engage students who encounter comprehension difficulties. Another valuable observation was the idea

of using short reflection prompts at the end of each chapter, which could encourage learners to connect the text with their own personal experiences. Encouraging students to share their thoughts on chapters, as my colleague recommended, could create a more collaborative and interactive learning environment. This aligns with the observation that reading becomes more meaningful when combined with peer interaction. Since all students read the same book, Jamie Summer's *Roll with It*, vocabulary assessments could be directly linked to the text. These assessments, administered every two weeks, focused on key words and phrases introduced in the chapters, allowing students to consolidate new vocabulary and providing a measurable indication of their progress. This suggestion reflects Suk's (2017) emphasis on aligning assessments with the vocabulary students encounter during reading.

Overall, these exploratory findings suggest that while ER has the potential to improve vocabulary and reading comprehension, its success depends on access to suitable materials, time allocation within the curriculum, and strategies for sustaining students' motivation. The survey results showed that students were more engaged when they could choose texts that matched their interests. Similarly, the recommendation to integrate peer discussion and vocabulary assessments highlights the importance of combining ER with supportive teaching practices. These insights provided a foundation for the action stage of the research – to plan and implement specific strategies to make ER more effective for my learners.

Action phase findings

The action stage began with the preparation of a diverse collection of accessible graded readers and short stories, spanning various genres and levels of difficulty. Students were encouraged to form a reading community and self-select texts based on their interests. At the beginning, all students chose to read an adventure story, Jamie Summer's *Roll with It*, as their first reading text, reflecting their preferences and high initial engagement. This approach can be considered as a Modified or Class Reading with follow-up activities, which is a "distinct and equally valid" form of ER in comparison to classical model (Waring & McLean, 2015, p. 161). After students chose the story, I designed reading comprehension tasks that incorporated the target vocabulary to support the acquisition of new lexical items and the active use of target vocabulary in both written and spoken forms, providing structured support while maintaining student choice and motivation.

By structuring the reading process in this way, the intervention aimed to balance independent reading with targeted classroom support. This stage provided a foundation for students to develop stronger reading habits and enhance linguistic skills. The subsequent interactive reading activities included group discussions about plot and characters, role-plays based on story events, debates on key themes, and writing short summaries or reflections. The discussions focused on the main ideas of the stories, predictions about the plot, students' personal responses, and the new vocabulary encountered. Through this process, students were supposed to not only strengthen their comprehension skills but also to develop greater confidence in expressing ideas and opinions in English. Overall, all these follow-up activities were designed to deepen comprehension, encourage active use of new vocabulary, and foster collaborative engagement in reading among students.

An online class blog was also introduced to serve as a reflective space where students could share their reading experiences, respond to guiding questions, and complete additional vocabulary activities. I monitored students' contributions, documented their reflections, and recorded evidence of vocabulary use in their posts and discussions. The blog thus functioned

both as a pedagogical tool and as a means of collecting qualitative data on learners’ engagement and reading comprehension.

When I planned these interventions, namely allowing students to select their preferred reading texts and maintaining engagement in reading through discussions, vocabulary activities and a blog, I aimed to increase students’ motivation and support their vocabulary development as well as reading comprehension. In addition, incorporating reflective writing and collaborative activities aimed to foster learner autonomy, critical thinking, and confidence in using English. Most students decided to read the same books as a class which enabled shared discussions while still allowing for personal reflection and engagement with the text.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the ER programme, I collected data from students’ formative assessments (pre- and post-tests), observations of students’ engagement in classroom interactions and their contributions to the class blog throughout the intervention. The data from formative assessments (tests after each chapter) that included reading comprehension and vocabulary questions demonstrated measurable gains (see Table 3). Notably, the post-test scores indicated significant improvements in students’ ability to identify main ideas, retrieve details, make inferences more accurately, implement new words in practice compared to the pre-test performance. The overall performance in tests reflects a positive outcome, suggesting that the majority of students benefited from the ER programme.

Table 3.
Students’ Vocabulary Test Results

Test	No of Students	A Grade	B Grade	Failed	Overall Outcome
Pre-Test (before Chapter 1)	14	4	6	4	Moderate performance, many struggled with new vocabulary
Test 1 (after Chapter 1)	14	12	2	0	Strong performance with majority achieving top results
Test 2 (after Chapter 2)	14	9	3	2	Slight variation in performance but overall positive outcome

Data collected from the class blog revealed that 14 students actively shared their reflections on the “Readers’ blog”. In their posts, students frequently used the vocabulary items they had encountered in the selected book, which indicates active learning and application. Besides, students’ reflective blog entries demonstrated a deeper understanding of story plots and characters, as they were able to summarise chapters, express personal opinions, and discuss new vocabulary in context. Finally, observations during collaborative discussions revealed that students could articulate ideas more clearly, respond to peers’ interpretations, and make predictions about story outcomes, indicating enhanced comprehension and engagement with the texts.

Overall, the findings at the action level indicate that ER not only supported vocabulary growth and comprehension but also increased students’ confidence and motivation. The

combination of independent reading, collaborative activities, and reflective blogging contributed to both linguistic and attitudinal improvements among the learners.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that ER can play a significant role in improving 9th-grade EFL students' vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. This EAR project showed that when students were given opportunities to read graded readers of their own choice, combined with collaborative discussions and reflective blogging, they could develop greater confidence in their reading skills and began to use new vocabulary more actively. Both quantitative evidence from vocabulary tests and surveys and qualitative data from blog reflections confirmed the effectiveness of ER in supporting language development as well as learner motivation.

From a pedagogical perspective, this research highlights the importance of providing students with access to varied and level-appropriate reading materials. The positive results suggest that ER should not be viewed as an optional activity, but rather as an essential part of the EFL curriculum. Teachers can support this by integrating ER into their lessons, organising reading clubs, and encouraging reflective sharing through digital platforms or peer discussions.

At the policy level, it is recommended that schools and educational authorities allocate more time and resources to support ER initiatives. This includes investing in collections of graded readers, developing teacher training modules on ER practices, and creating supportive frameworks that encourage students to read for pleasure in English. Institutions should also consider integrating formative vocabulary assessments alongside reading activities to help track progress and consolidate learning.

For future research, further studies could explore how ER influences different groups of learners, such as students of varying proficiency levels or learners in rural and urban contexts. Comparative studies involving different genres of texts could also shed light on how reading preferences affect motivation and vocabulary acquisition. In addition, longitudinal studies would provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of ER on overall language proficiency.

In conclusion, this teacher research project demonstrates that ER is a powerful approach to enhancing both vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension among EFL learners. With the right support from teachers, institutions, and policymakers, it can become a sustainable and motivating practice that significantly contributes to language development in secondary school contexts.

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