Indonesian EFL Learners' Responses To Extensive Reading: Benefits and Challenges

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Abstrak
Karena manfaatnya terhadap banyak keterampilan spesifik, ER telah dipercaya sebagai salah satu solusi terbaik dalam merangsang penguasaan bahasa siswa. Namun, terlepas dari manfaat yang ditawarkan, beberapa kendala dan masalah juga dilaporkan muncul baik dari guru maupun siswa. Studi saat ini mencoba untuk menggali (1) manfaat ER pada keterampilan spesifik yang diakui oleh mahasiswa dan (2) hambatan yang mereka hadapi dalam menerapkan ER. Penelitian ini melibatkan 4 mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di salah satu universitas di Riau, Indonesia yang telah menerapkan ER sebelum mereka masuk Universitas. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui angket terbuka dan wawancara. Temuan dan diskusi tentang tanggapan peserta terhadap ER kemudian disajikan dan saran untuk penelitian lebih lanjut juga diberikan.
Kata kunci: Manfaat, Tantangan, Membaca Ekstensif

Abstract
Due to its many benefits for specific skills, extensive reading (ER) has been trusted as one of the best solutions in stimulating student language acquisition. However, apart from the benefits it offers, some constraints and issues were also reported that arise from both teachers and students. The current study attempted to investigate (1) the benefits of ER on specific skills recognized by university students and (2) the obstacles they face in implementing ER. This study involved four students of an English Education Study Program at a university in Riau, Indonesia, who implemented ER before they entered the university. The data were collected through open-ended questionnaires adapted from Arai (2019) and interviews. Findings and discussions about the participants' responses to ER are then presented, and suggestions for further research are also given.
Keywords: Benefit, Challenges, Extensive Reading.

INTRODUCTION

As one of the macro skills in language learning, reading plays an important role in students' language acquisition. However, in its implementation, especially in the context of EFL, several major problems are often encountered. Some of them are the low reading comprehension of students because the reading materials they read are difficult and exceed their abilities (Kweldju, 2000 in Cahyono & Widyawati, 2006), the difficulty of maintaining students' reading interest (Chang & Renandya, 2017), and a lack of reading strategy that triggers the occurrence of these two things (Ko, 2013). In the end, all of this has a serious impact on the students' low mastery of English.

To overcome low reading skills and efforts to find the appropriate strategy, Extensive Reading (ER) is regarded by many scholars as one of the right solutions to be applied in learning English to help students acquire language acquisition. Departing from the impact of "comprehensible input" (Krashen, 2003, cited in Krashen et al., 2018, p. 2). which says that "we acquire language and develop literacy when we understand messages, that is when we understand what we hear and what we read when we receive comprehensive input" ER is believed to be effective in stimulating students' language acquisition because it was born from this principle. Here, Krashen explains the importance of language

acquisition rather than language learning because language acquisition is a subconscious process that will automatically take part in language fluency (Tricomi, 1986).

Among the scholars who express several other basic principles of ER, those proposed by Day and Bamford (2002) are the most widely used as references by researchers and educators worldwide. Initially, there were ten basic principles of ER that characterize the application of ER. However, some principles may be too idealistic by some schools, so that there are at least five core principles of ER that must be followed in order for ER to have a successful effect on student language acquisition (Macalister, 2015; Ng, Renandya and Chong, 2019; Waring and Mclean, 2015). They are: (1) students read a wide range of texts, (2) the reading materials are within the students' level of proficiency and interests, (3) reading is faster, (4) students read and choose only the texts that they like, and (5) the purpose of reading is for getting general information which means that some features of IR such as the aforementioned should be avoided. Thus, related to this case, Macalister (2015) prompts that these basic ten principles or the latest five ones should be treated as principles and characteristics of ER, not as a commandment.

The myriad benefits of ER have been felt by institutions, teachers, and especially students in specific skills such as gains on student reading comprehension, grammatical competence and vocabulary knowledge (Bell, 2001; Sheu, 2003), vocabulary acquisition (Suk, 2016; Webb & Chang, 2015), reading fluency (e.g., Bell, 2001; Hufman, 2014; Iwahori, 2008), and writing performance (Irvine, 2011; Park, 2016). Overall, ER is impactful in enhancing learners' motivation to read and on the whole, student English learning (Takase, 2008). Apart from that, several previous studies have also explored the challenges faced by readers, especially by students, in implementing ER. Among them are the difficulty in monitoring student independent reading (Macalister, 2010), the assumption that ER is not worthy of consideration as "learning" (Prowse, 2022), and the lack of students' interest in reading (Chang & Renandya, 2017). Due to the many misconceptions and misunderstandings about "the primacy of ER" from many parties (including principals, school administrators, teachers, students, and school committees), for example, the status of ER which is deemed unfit for learning in schools, ER has its own challenges in implementation (Ng, Renandya, & Chong, 2015).

There has been little research examining the effect of ER on students who are still implementing ER, have taken the ER course as a part of the curriculum, and have started ER since high school time pada context EFL. Thus, the current study investigates the benefits and challenges in implementing ER faced by four students who are currently still implementing ER at a university in Riau, Indonesia. This research was expected to contribute both in theory and practice, especially in promoting reading literacy which is still low in Indonesia (Nurdiyanti & Suryanto, 2010). It was deemed vital since determining the level of ER success requires an understanding of how ER serves Indonesian students and the challenges they confront. It was also crucial to figure out what steps should be made and how to make ER a habit in Indonesian schools.

RESEARCH METHOD

The current study is descriptive qualitative research revealing the benefits and the challenges of ER experienced by four university students majoring in English at a well-known university in Riau, Indonesia. An initial questionnaire was sent to the 7th-semester students from two classes in that university through a Google form link distributed via WhatsApp (WA). First, formal permission to conduct the current research was obtained from the lecturer teaching both classes. Second, the focus of the study and the procedures to collect the data were thoroughly described to these students at the end of their online class meeting. Then, the students with the willingness to participate in the present study were asked to fill in the questionnaires prepared by the researchers.

The questionnaire was adapted from Arai (2019) and included both open and closed-ended questions to collect data on any student who has been doing ER before they entered the university and is still doing it until the current time. The questionnaire consists of 3 sections. Section 1, the open-ended question, asked the students to write their ER definition in their own words. Next, in section 2, the students had to answer six Likert scale questions that contained the benefits of ER. Then, about the ER challenges, open-ended questions (Section 3) were included in the questionnaire, which is the students described the ER challenges in their own words.

Thirteen students filled in the questionnaires but only four of them were chosen to be the participants of the study. The four students were selected on the basis of their degree of intensity of implementing ER and some other related information they had shared. These four students confirmed their willingness to be interviewed via WA video calls. They were interviewed several times to get information about the benefits of ER that they feel and the obstacles they face in ER activities so far. The data from these research instruments were analyzed according to several comprehensive literatures from ER scholars, especially the 10 ER principles proposed by Day and Bamford (2002).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Result
The following paragraphs center on the findings from the questionnaire and interview analysis on the four participants' benefits and challenges in implementing ER. The next section will present the discussion session regarding those findings.

Understanding on ER
Before exploring the benefits and challenges felt by students after doing ER, it is important to know the level of students' understanding of ER. It is assumed that the ER practice carried out by students would be closely related to how deep their understanding of ER itself is. The students' understanding of ER was asked in point 1 of the questionnaire. Meanwhile, their understanding of ER was further explored during the interview.

The first student who gave the response on the Google form, Rina, wrote that
> "*Extensive reading is reading a large number and variety of reading materials so that over time it becomes a hobby*".

During the interview, she explained that she knew the concept of ER well since the 2nd grade of high school when she was explicitly taught by her mother. She said,
> "*… I was taught in a very clear way, yes, like adults talk. Mother explained the basic concepts and how to do ER*".

From the interview, it was known that Rina's mother is an English teacher at a public high school in her area who often buys storybooks for her children to read at home.
> "*If at school we learn English explicitly and based on grammar, My mother said that at home, I don't have to study anymore, you don't need to take more lessons, just read the books that she bought me*".

When Rina was asked about the monitoring process carried out by her mother, she explained that no special notes were made regarding her reading progress.
> "*… as far as I know, no, but She gets angry when the book is still tidy. She has spent a lot to buy them but we don't read them diligently, that's it…*".

Furthermore, Mei, interpreted that "ER is reading as often as possible, any reading that is interesting to read". When interviewed, Mei even confirmed her understanding of ER by distinguishing it from IR,

"*IR is intensive, right... it's like studying in class, there is a text, then we are told by the teacher to write down difficult words, look for them in groups, then the whole text will be translated together. Yes, we really learn that way. ER is extensive, we read more, but we are not told to do it, we just want to do whatever we want, only for those who want to develop*".

Regarding the variety of books she read, Mei explained that she read serial novels and started liking news articles in newspapers and online magazines.

Meanwhile, Yuna defined ER as

"*... a continuous reading program so that we are no longer afraid of English, so that we are more accustomed and familiar with English readings*". Furthermore, Yesi explained that "*English is difficult for many students in Indonesia, generally they are afraid, so they must get used to reading English texts, listening to songs and watching English videos. I like watching the daily vlogs of students in America or England, I like reading too, but I watch more often, it's practical and I just need the internet data*".

Yesi, the last student who expressed her understanding of ER wrote that "ER is reading many types of reading, which are diverse". When asked to explain further, Yesi said

"*... it must be really extensive, careful, not missing any important information*".

Because Yesi's explanation did not match what she wrote previously in the questionnaire, her sentences on the questionnaire were read out again. Then she was asked to explain further,

"*It means, don't choose the readings, just read them all so that later we are familiar with all types of reading, we will understand better. Exams made easy*".

Benefits of ER

Before the benefits of ER from each research participant are described, it is important to know when they started doing ER. Based on the questionnaire, Rina has been implementing ER since high school grade 2. Then, Mei has maintained reading English books since high school grade 3. Meanwhile, Yesi and Yuna have been doing ER since they first entered university. From the interview results with the four students, some prominent excerpts were obtained about the benefits of ER on their development of specific skills. The first student stated,

"*There are people who have anxiety when dealing with English texts. When I see the English text, for example, the article, there is interest, it's the same as seeing the Indonesian text...*" (Rina).

From her explanation, it can be seen that the benefit he mentioned is on her reading interest itself. Further, similarly, Yesi mentioned

"*I was not trained to read before; I felt that English texts were long. Now they feel easier,*"

Besides this benefit, Yesi mentioned that the ER activities she has done had improved her reading speed and had a big impact on her time management when she took reading tests such as the TOEFL. She said

"*I have enough time to understand the text so I can answer correctly.*"

Moreover, the next student, Mei, mentioned that there were additions and variations to her current English vocabulary. Uniquely, Mei said that she was not interested in graded readers. She said,

"*I like books with different authors. One book is finished and then the story ends. I read novels with thin pages whose English is still basic.*"

When asked why she read a basic book, similar to Rina, she said

"*the thing I wanted to build when I started reading was a habit. I don't want to be burdened. I read 2-3 times a week.*"

The next benefit of ER mentioned by these students is in their English grammar. Yuna said,

"*My grammar is getting better because I can get a picture from what I've read so far*."

She explained that the impact of this grammar improvement significantly affected her writing ability in English. Yesi termed this situation as "ringing". She said

"*I read the text in one area or topic. Automatically, many vocabularies are under the same topic and sometimes appear repeatedly. They ring in my head.*"

Differently, Rina explained that she was not sure that the improvement in her grammar was due to ER. He said,

"*I think it's because I used to study grammar in school and I already understood it.*"

When asked who chose the books they read, they all said the same thing. They choose themselves from the available options, decide their attitude towards the reading, and even stop reading when they are no longer interested. They told us that this was a kind of indirect strategy to maintain their reading interest in the future.

Despite all the benefits above, all students agreed that their reading habits did not affect improving listening, speaking, or pronunciation skills. Extensive listening plays a role in this benefit, which was also carried out simultaneously by three students in this study.

Challenges of implementing ER

From the results of the interviews that explored their obstacles in implementing ER in their first year, Yuna said,

"*What I feel the most is the difficulty in getting the readings that I like. The books that I like are rarely in the library (campus library). The central library is far from my campus. When I buy it sometimes the language is good but I don't really like the story.*"

When Yuna was asked about her attitude towards reading she didn't like she said,

"*I stopped reading that book.*"

Rina, Yesi, and Mei shared the same answer. Yesi added,
"*Maintaining interest in reading is a struggle for me. I have to quickly find the next book. If there is a pause, I'm afraid I'm lazy to start again*".

Then, 3 of these students; Rina, Yesi, and Mei mentioned that they read English texts for their own pleasure, without coercion. Rina said,
"*My mother is a teacher, so she likes to buy us English books. I read what I like. Others just put it on the shelf in the living room. Maybe my sister reads them. I don't know either.*"

Yesi said that she didn't even know exactly whether it was called motivation or not.
"*All I know is that I enjoyed reading this book, what story I got. Because it's interesting, I want to read on.*"

Regarding the time constraint, Rina and Mei said that it was not a big problem for her. Rina said,
"*Lectures are indeed busier now, sometimes I even stay up late. But, basically, I like reading, yes I still read my English novels when I take a break from doing assignments.*"

Mei said,
"*In fact, I feel like I need more time now because I'm starting to like reading about politics like the Jakarta post. It's challenging, but I like it.*"

Meanwhile, Yuna and Yesi revealed that there was a decrease in the quantity of reading since they were more busy studying and had to read more academic books such as articles. Yesi said,
"*I still like it, but it's not as frequent as it used to be. Now, when I have the time, it's not as much as what I usually read.*"

When I asked Yesi about the sources of books she has been reading, she described,
"They *can come from anywhere. Sometimes I change books with my friends, sometimes books from my sister's school library, sometimes I buy my own…*" Yuna explained, "*I still read because I like it, but now I don't really read novels anymore. At least I'm waiting for the next series that hasn't been launched yet. I read more academic books now.*"

From the overall interviews about the challenges in implementing ER, there are two main issues expressed by the four participants, namely related to the availability of relevant materials and time. Regardless of the challenges they felt in implementing ER. It can be seen from the interview excerpts presented that they thought ER was worth doing because of the benefits they felt supporting their academic efforts in college.

Discussion

ER is defined into several meanings by scholars. They interpret ER as free voluntary reading, wide reading, pleasure reading, and self-selected reading (Ng, Renandya, & Chong, 2019). Judging from the definition of ER written by the participants in the questionnaire, ER was defined in various ways. These definitions are also generally in line with the latest core details of ER offered by

Macalister (2015), Ng, Renandya and Chong (2019), Waring and Mclean (2015). The definition written by Rina that

"*ER is reading books in large and varied amounts...*"

is in accordance with the first principle of ER that "students read a wide range of texts". Rina also explained in the interview that reading in large amounts aimed to make reading a hobby. In other words, it can also be said that the purpose of ER conveyed by Rina was to form a reading habit as conveyed by Richard & Schmidt (2002), namely to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading. From what she wrote on the questionnaire, it appears that Rina understood ER well, which would be seen from her answers about the benefits and challenges of ER that she faced.

Then, in the questionnaire, Mei wrote that ER is

"*... . What is important is interesting to read*".

Thus, principle no 4 of the core principles of ER (Macalister (2015), Ng, Renandya and Chong (2019), Waring and Mclean (2015) was fulfilled. Furthermore, in the interview, Mei explained that she did not like graded readers because she thought that they were not worth reading,

"*The story is too short, too many pictures, too expensive…*"

This shows that she read the kind of books she liked,

"*I like thin novels with different authors*".

The choice of reading for each individual's choice is for the pleasure purpose so that students like what they read and it becomes a habit, not boredom (Macalister, 2015).

Based on the definition written in the questionnaire and the explanation in the interview, as described in the findings section, it can be seen that Yuna also understood ER quite well. Despite the definition she gave that ER is a continuous reading, because she read serial novels such as the tetralogy, she said that sometimes her reading breaks were long, and her reading frequency decreased because she was struggling and waiting a long time to read the next reading. These challenges were presented in the remainder of this paper.

Meanwhile, from the definition and explanation of the ER concept she understood, Yesi seemed to doubt the real concept of ER. This confusion is real about the word "extensive" (Macalister, 2015). Yesi explained extensively as

"*… don't choose the readings, just read them all so that later we will be familiar with all types of reading*".

Meanwhile, the core principle of ER is reading based on personal interest to build a culture of reading pleasure in English so that one's English language skills also increase, following the final goal that should be achieved by ER (Day & Bamford, 2002). Thus, any misconceptions about ER are fundamental to be straightened out for students so that the correct ER practice is carried out and the ER goals are achieved (Renandya & Jacobs, 2016).

In general, the findings of the benefits of ER presented by these four students have impacts on several skills; an increase in reading interest as well as a decrease in reading anxiety, an increase in reading speed, and grammar understanding. Meanwhile, ER does not have any impact on their speaking (and pronunciation) and listening skills. The benefits mentioned above are some of those promised by ER as revealed by Day and Bamford (2002). In his research for two semesters at a

language institution, Bell (2001) found an increase in students' reading interest after they were given graded-readers. The start of this interest also began to impact increasing students' scores when they were tested with reading tests. In this study, what was revealed by Rina is exactly the same as what was expressed by one of the students in the study of Taguchi, Maass, and Gorsuch (2004), who said, "Reading long English passages is no longer difficult or painful."

Although graded-readers are the type most recommended by scholars to raise students' enthusiasm (Nation, 2008), especially for beginners, they are not necessarily liked by all students. Mei, in this study, as described in the findings, did not like graded-readers. However, it does not seem to affect his reading interest. This relates to the ER principles proposed by Day and Bamford (2002); the students must like what they read and read it on their own accord. Yesi's benefits from ER are also evident because she became interested in reading political and scientific literature and did reading tests or English tests such as TOEFL more easily and understood.

Their benefits from implementing ER are also inseparable from their freedom to choose books according to their own will. Henry (1995) said that basically, teachers could not choose reading materials for students to read because students need to read for themselves, not for their teachers. The four students' descriptions in this study which revealed that they stopped reading if the reading was boring or had language that they found difficult to digest, is one of the characteristics of a correct ER implementation (Day & Bamford, 2002). However, Asraf and Ahmad (2003) stated different things in their research on school children in an underdeveloped area. Although the process was long, the increase in reading interest still occurred in their students even though the teachers chose the reading on the grounds that the teachers understood the students' abilities better. These teachers were asked to study the entire series of graded readers before deciding which to share with their students for reading. This practice contradicts principle number 3 of Day and Bamford, but the reason for choosing books by teachers also sounds logical because students are schoolchildren who can be indecisive about the readings they read.

The findings of this study also show that the four students have their own desire to read English reading materials. Takase (2007) explains that intrinsic motivation will greatly affect how much time a person spends reading. Mei shows that at the beginning of her efforts to form a reading habit, she did try to read on her own 2 to 3 times a week. The assumption here is based on Rina's narrative that some of the books provided by her mother are that interest in reading in a foreign language such as the context in Indonesia, is closely related to home literacy and reading habit in their L1 language as expressed by Medford & McGeown, 2012).

The next benefit expressed by the students from their reading habit was an increase in their understanding and use of English grammar, especially in writing. Yesi calls it the term "ringing", which is an unconscious process that automatically occurs when someone understands the message contained in the language (Krashen, 2013). Many benefits of ER have been found by many scholars as described in the introduction part, and other benefits that have been explored by previous scholars but did not appear in this study. One of them may be caused by the limited number of research participants.

Renandya, Hidayati, and Ivone (2020) described constraints in ER implementation in general. They raise ten obstacles based on comprehensive field observations, including obstacles from the school, teachers and other components, and the students themselves. Of the ten obstacles, two were found in this study, namely the challenge of finding relevant reading materials and time limitations.

Regarding these two obstacles, according to the observation and interviews, these four students have intrinsic motivation, are aware of their academic needs, and are average-high achievers in the class. One of the ten principles of applying ER by Day and Bamford (2002) is that reading must be

done individually and silently. Principle number 8 is closely related to students' intrinsic motivation found in the four participants.

CONCLUSION

There has been a general suggestion that ER is an approach that can stimulate student language acquisition, which can increase specific skills unconsciously but significantly. To build literacy, Indonesian people, especially students, should start to form reading habits which are a major part of implementing ER. This study aimed to investigate four EFL university learners' responses to ER, including the benefits they experienced and the challenges they faced. To explore these two things, their understanding of the ER concept was asked briefly in the questionnaire and in-depth in the interview. This study shows four university students' various benefits and challenges in implementing ER. Based on observation, *we* assume that these four students are at least in the range of average-high achievers in the English subject because they have a strong motivation to read texts in English which is also influenced by their home literacy. Before students are encouraged to do ER, *we* think that ER needs to be understood and socialized by teachers and schools. So, the practice of ER is carried out correctly by referring to the principles in the implementation of ER, one of which is proposed by Day and Bamford (2002).

Notwithstanding the findings revealed in this study, the participants are very limited, and they almost have the same academic background and achievements. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized. Expanding the number of research participants or selecting those with various academic backgrounds will be suggested for further research.

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