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Vietnamese EFL Learners' Perspectives on Online Extensive Reading during Emergency Remote L2 Teaching

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Abstract

Previous research has shown a range of benefits of extensive reading for second or foreign language (L2) learning, as well as learners' positive attitudes towards extensive reading. However, during emergency remote teaching around the globe as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, where all L2 classes have been moved online, little research has investigated online extensive reading as well as learners' perspectives on this activity. Therefore, the present study was conducted to investigate Vietnamese EFL learners' perspectives on online extensive reading during emergency remote L2 teaching amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Eighty-seven Vietnamese EFL learners at a local university participated in the study. They were involved in one online extensive reading over 12 weeks. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. The results showed that all the learners had positive attitudes towards online extensive reading during emergency remote L2 teaching. Learners reported enjoying the variety of topics and genres found in online extensive reading, the suitability of the texts for their L2 proficiency, the usefulness of the program for enhancing their L2 competence as well as general knowledge, along with the convenience that the program offers. Learners also suggested several improvements in the website interface and the addition of more topics, genres, and quizzes.

Keywords: Emergency remote teaching, English as a foreign language, extensive reading, Covid-19.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a number of changes in different aspects of life around the world. In education, in particular, face-to-face classrooms have been forced to be moved online, which presented several challenges to teaching and learning. As for second or foreign language (L2) teaching, many studies have shown major issues in remote teaching during Covid-19, such as students' lack of focus and motivation, students' negative attitudes, technological issues, material adaptation, or classroom management (Gao & Zhang, 2020; Kitishat et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2021). There have been many recommendations for emergency remote L2 teaching during Covid-19, one of which is online extensive reading (Nguyen, 2021).

Previous research has reported various benefits of extensive reading for learning various L2 skills and aspects, including reading (Bell, 2001; Iwahori, 2008; Robb & Kano, 2013), vocabulary (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Senoo & Yonemoto, 2014; Vu & Peters, 2020, 2021a), grammar (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Sheu, 2003), and writing (Lee & Hsu, 2009; Mermelstein, 2015). Only a few studies have investigated online extensive reading programs as well as learners' perspectives on those programs (Arnold, 2009; Cote & Milliner, 2015; Milliner & Cote, 2015; Zhou & Day, 2021). In Vietnam, however, little research could be found on online extensive reading (Bui & Macalister, 2021). It is, therefore, remains unknown whether online extensive reading can be an effective technique for emergency remote teaching in Vietnam during the Covid-19 pandemic, as previously suggested (Nguyen, 2021). As L2 classes are moved online, online extensive reading can be a feasible option for L2 students to improve their English proficiency, considering the benefits of extensive reading for L2 learning, as shown in previous studies (e.g., Lee et al., 2015; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Renandya et al., 1999). For those reasons, the present study was conducted to shed light on how Vietnamese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) perceive the effectiveness of an online extensive reading program amidst the global coronavirus pandemic.

In summary, it is worth exploring whether online extensive reading is effective during emergency remote L2 teaching from the perspective of L2 learners, especially those in Vietnam, where research on extensive reading and emergency remote L2 teaching is still somewhat limited. Also, most previous studies on extensive reading adopted quantitative methods and learners' perspectives were not often investigated (see Bui & Macalister, 2021; Vu & Peters, 2020 for exceptions). Therefore, the present study collected qualitative data to examine extensive reading from a different perspective. Specifically, the study sought to address the research question of "what were Vietnamese EFL learners' perspectives on online extensive reading?"

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Emergency Remote Teaching during the Covid-19

Emergency remote teaching refers to a temporary and sudden shift of instructional delivery from face-to-face to online instruction because of a disaster or crisis (Hodges et al., 2020). Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2019, emergency remote teaching has become an unavoidable option worldwide. As a sudden shift in instructional delivery, emergency remote teaching poses a number of

challenges for teachers, learners as well as other stakeholders (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Le & Truong, 2021; Sofianidis et al., 2021). As for L2 teaching, in particular, the challenges include teachers' limited information technology literacy, classroom management, technological issues, teachers' workload, material adaptation, and assessments (Gao & Zhang, 2020; Kitishat et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2021).

In Vietnam in particular, Nguyen (2021) found that one of the challenges in the emergency remote L2 teaching during the coronavirus pandemic was learners' difficulty staying focused and motivated because of their unfamiliarity with remote learning. Also, internet connection instability or breakdown might interrupt lessons. Another challenge was classroom management since it was difficult to monitor students' participation in each lesson, especially when they did not turn on their cameras during online lessons. Emergency remote teaching also requires more teacher's work in terms of feedback, testing and assessment, and material development. Consequently, a variety of techniques were reported to be employed, such as the use of code-switching to increase students' motivation (Nguyen & Vu, 2019), the adoption of a variety of activities to increase students' attention and engagement, or the implementation of online extensive reading to assist students in improving their L2 vocabulary knowledge and proficiency.

2.2 Benefits of (Online) Extensive Reading

Extensive reading can be defined as an "approach to the teaching and learning of reading in which learners read large amounts of material that are within their linguistic competence" (Grabe & Stoller, 2011, p. 286). According to Day and Bamford (2002), there are several characteristics of extensive reading. For instance, reading texts should be easy, address diverse topics, and interest students. In addition, texts should be read for pleasure, information, or general understanding, and the amount of reading should be subject to students' preferences. Also, extensive reading should be done individually and silently at a faster speed, with teachers providing guidance or working as role models.

Previous studies have shown that extensive reading benefits L2 learning in different ways. Renandya et al. (1999) found a significant positive correlation between the amount of extensive reading and improved L2 proficiency. Other studies reported a significant effect of extensive reading on reading fluency and comprehension (Bell, 2001; Iwahori, 2008; Mason & Krashen, 1997). The impact of extensive reading on L2 learning even extends to writing (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Lee & Hsu, 2009; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Mermelstein, 2015), grammar (Lee et al., 2015; Sheu, 2003; Yang, 2001), and especially vocabulary (Horst, 2005; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Senoo & Yonemoto, 2014).

Numerous studies in the Vietnamese context have demonstrated various advantages of extensive reading for L2 students. Extensive reading was found to affect the attitudes, reading fluency, and reading comprehension of Vietnamese EFL learners. For instance, Tran (2018) found that students' reading rate and comprehension were improved by extensive reading. More recently, Bui and Macalister (2021) also found that online extensive reading had a positive effect on learners' development of reading fluency. In terms of vocabulary, there is empirical evidence of the positive effect of extensive reading on Vietnamese EFL learners' acquisition of single words (Vu & Peters, 2020) and collocations (Vu & Peters, 2021a).

Considering the importance of vocabulary knowledge for L2 learners (e.g., Hsueh-Chao & Nation, 2000; Vu & Peters, 2012b), the Vietnamese EFL learners' limited vocabulary knowledge (Dang, 2020; Vu & Nguyen, 2019; Vu & Peters, 2021b), the high lexical demands of national high-stakes English exams in Vietnam (Vu, 2019), and the inadequacy of L2 textbooks in addressing different aspects of vocabulary knowledge (Vu & Michel, 2021), online extensive reading can be an effective way to enhance Vietnamese EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge during emergency remote L2 teaching in Vietnam.

2.3 Learners' Perspectives toward Online Extensive Reading

Concerning learners' perspectives on online extensive reading, a few recent studies have shown that learners have positive attitudes towards online extensive reading (Arnold, 2009; Bui & Macalister, 2021; Cote & Milliner, 2015; Milliner & Cote, 2015; Zhou & Day, 2021). For instance, Arnold (2009) found that online extensive reading increased learners' motivation to read, enhanced their confidence about their L2 reading ability, and encouraged more out-of-class reading for pleasure. Cote and Milliner (2015) revealed learners' appreciation of the convenience and accessibility of online extensive reading while Zhou and Day (2021) reported that learners felt improvements in their reading fluency, vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, writing, and speaking. In Bui and Macalister (2021), Vietnamese EFL learners claimed that online extensive reading helped them develop their reading fluency, vocabulary knowledge, reading comprehension, and pragmatic L2 use.

It has been noted that some features of online extensive reading are appealing to learners. Those features include the program's convenience or accessibility (Bui & Macalister, 2021; Cote & Milliner, 2015; Milliner & Cote, 2015; Zhou & Day, 2021), the variety of reading materials (Milliner & Cote, 2015; Zhou & Day, 2021), the availability of the quizzes to check comprehension (Zhou & Day, 2021), the suitability of reading texts for learner's proficiency (Bui & Macalister, 2021). However, some characteristics of online extensive reading might demotivate learners, such as technical errors (Cote & Milliner, 2015), eyestrain (Bui & Macalister, 2021; Cote & Milliner, 2015), the lack of genres, and the unappealing website design (Bui & Macalister, 2021).

3. METHODS

3.1 Participants

Participants were first-year economics and business majors at a local university in Vietnam who were 87 EFL learners aged 17 (14 males, 73 females). According to the listening, reading, grammar, and vocabulary entrance test at their university, their level of English proficiency was pre-intermediate. Due to the effects of Covid-19, convenience sampling was used to make it easier for the author to collect data. They are coded as S1 for Student 1, S2 for Student 2, and so forth, in this article.

3.2 Materials

All reading materials were online on the website <https://www.er-central.com/> developed by Extensive Reading Central, a not-for-profit organization that develops the extensive reading and extensive listening approaches to L2 learning. This website was chosen for many reasons. Firstly, it contains a wide range of genres of texts on various topics for students to select from, which meets the requirements of an extensive reading program (Day & Bamford, 2002). Secondly, it was user-friendly with clear instructions on how the resources could be employed. Finally, it was free, making it more accessible to teachers and students in developing countries with limited financial resources like Vietnam. There are also quizzes to check learners' comprehension and ratings of the texts. More importantly, it allowed the teacher to create different classes to manage her students' reading progress. Also, students could easily monitor their progress.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The current study used a qualitative methodology to explore Vietnamese EFL learners' perspectives on online extensive reading. More specifically, information was gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews with participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as a result of their flexibility, which allows participants to elaborate on pertinent topics and introduce new ones, according to Payne (2000). The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese or English at the participants' discretion. The guiding question for the participants was: "What do you think of the online extensive reading program?" The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the thematic analysis technique following Braun and Clarke's (2012) procedure. Firstly, the researcher read the transcripts of the interviews to familiarize herself with the data, followed by a systematic analysis of the data through generating initial coding. After that, the researcher reviewed the coded data to look for similarities and overlaps between codes to search for themes and subthemes. Then the researcher reviewed the developing themes with reference to the coded data to check the quality of themes before defining and naming them.

3.4 Procedures

The whole experiment lasted 12 weeks. In the first week, the participants were provided with informed consent forms to grant permission for their data to be used in the study. Next, they were informed of the objectives of the online extensive reading program as well as reasons why it should be implemented. Then, step-to-step instructions on how to use the website were provided and demonstrated. Class accounts were created for all participants who were instructed to log in and start with a reading level assessment available on the website to identify the most suitable level for their reading texts. According to the website, learners should choose a level that contains just about one or two new words to meet the 98% coverage required for appropriate reading comprehension (Hsueh-Chao & Nation, 2000). Learners were told to freely choose what to read and that what mattered most would be their experience, i.e., how much they would enjoy the reading rather than for testing purposes. From weeks 2 to 11, learners did an online extensive reading at home as instructed. The

website tracked students' numbers of login, numbers of texts read, as well as total reading time spent on each text, all of which could be downloaded in an Excel sheet to help the teacher monitor students' engagement in online extensive reading. In addition, each week learners came to class to orally share in groups what they had read in the previous week. In week 12, 20 out of 87 learners were invited to semi-structured interviews on their online extensive reading experience.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Semi-structured interviews with all the participants showed that they all had positive attitudes towards online extensive reading, which was in line with previous research on online extensive reading (Arnold, 2009; Bui & Macalister, 2021; Cote & Milliner, 2015; Zhou & Day, 2021). Four major themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews regarding learners' perspectives on the online extensive reading program, namely variety and suitability, usefulness, convenience, and suggestions for improvement.

4.1 Variety and Suitability

Eighty-five participants reported their enjoyment of the variety and suitability in terms of topics, genres, proficiency levels, and length in the online extensive reading program. Regarding the topics, a number of the participants complimented the range of exciting topics found in the program. For example, two participants (pseudonyms) commented that:

- (1) "Thanks to the diverse and interesting topics of the texts I didn't have to waste time looking for the texts I would love to read" (S1)
- (2) "There were various familiar topics close to my daily life, so I really enjoyed them." (S2)

Meanwhile, the variety of genres made it easy for the participants to choose texts of their interest:

- (3) "There was a great variety of genres; therefore, I could choose the genres of my interest." (S3)

As for proficiency levels, the participants reported easily finding texts within their English competence:

- (4) "The texts were of different proficiency levels for me, so I could choose the ones that would be the most suitable for my current level of English competence." (S4)

Length of the texts was another factor that learners paid attention to:

- (6) "The texts were in general of appropriate length, neither too long nor too short, so I could read without getting bored or tired easily." (S4)

Since extensive reading should be easy, of various topics, and interest to learners (Day & Bamford, 2002), it was clear that the online extensive reading program met these requirements. This finding suggests that online extensive reading can be a

solution to the issue of limited resources for extensive reading encountered in many L2 contexts (Susser & Robb, 1990).

4.2 Usefulness

All eighty-seven participants highly appreciated the usefulness of the online extensive reading program for learning not only English but also general knowledge. As one learner stated:

- (7) “I was very excited to do extensive reading online because I could improve my English proficiency and gain more general knowledge.” (S5)

Concerning learning English, eighteen participants claimed that the online extensive reading program helped them improve different aspects of English competence, including reading, grammar, and vocabulary.

- (8) “There were a lot of interesting stories, which made me motivated to read more and more. The more I read in English, the better I felt my English reading skills became”. (S6)
(9) “I saw many interesting sentence structures in the texts and tried to learn them. So I believe that the program helped me improve my grammar.” (S7)
(10) “I could learn so many useful words on different topics because there are clear definitions provided.” (S8)

Regarding general knowledge, six participants claimed that it was the lessons acquired from the reading texts that were suggested to improve learners’ knowledge of various topics.

- (11) “I gained some general knowledge in life through meaningful lessons contained in each reading text” (S9).

Indeed, previous research has shown that extensive reading could improve learners’ reading (Bell, 2001; Iwahori, 2008; Mason & Krashen, 1997), grammar (Lee et al., 2015; Sheu, 2003; Yang, 2001), and vocabulary (Horst, 2005; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Senoo & Yonemoto, 2014; Vu & Peters, 2020, 2021a, 2022). Therefore, online extensive reading could have the same effects on L2 learners’ English competence as previously shown for extensive reading. As for general knowledge, Vietnamese EFL learners’ beliefs about their improvement of general knowledge gained through online extensive reading might match those of L2 teachers (Macalister, 2010) as well as L2 learners in other contexts (Yamashita, 2013, 2015). When learners read various texts within their linguistic competence, they were provided with information about different topics. They thus were given opportunities to widen their knowledge of various areas.

4.3 Convenience

Eighty-six participants reported enjoying the convenience of online extensive reading. Several factors were mentioned, including the accessibility of the texts within learners’ linguistic competence, the availability of reading levels assessment, the inclusion of dictionary definitions, the self-monitor of reading progress, the enclosed images as well short quizzes.

- (12) "I have always struggled to find materials suitable for my English proficiency to practice. Thanks to this website, everything has become much easier, so I'm very excited about it." (S6)
- (13) "Reading has never been so flexible to me. I can read anytime, anywhere". (S10)
- (14) "I could assess my own reading level before I started reading, which was so great." (S11)
- (15) "I loved it that definitions of new words were provided, so I didn't need to go to other websites to look up new words. That saved me a lot of time". (S12)
- (16) "It was an effective learning experience for me because the website keeps track of my reading time." (S13)
- (17) "I like the quizzes. They were very interesting and useful for me to check my own understanding of the texts". (S14)

The reported enjoyment of the convenience of online extensive reading was similar to other previous studies (Bui & Macalister, 2021; Milliner & Cote, 2015; Zhou & Day, 2021). Such convenience of online extensive reading can be attributed to the wide availability of the internet as well as the fast-paced development of information technology which has enabled the creation of a range of intelligent and interactive computer-based or mobile-based applications and programs.

4.4 Suggestions for Improvement

While all the participants had positive perspectives on online extensive reading, several of them made a few suggestions to improve their online reading experience, namely the interface of the website, the variety of topics and genres, the addition of quizzes, and some technical issues.

Regarding the website surface, seven students said that the interface could be more appealing with fewer distracting banners for advertisements. In comparison, three students suggested an increased font size to prevent eyestrain.

- (18) "The current interface looks a bit boring. It should be made more attractive". (S15)
- (19) "I don't like to see so many advertisement banners on the website because they sometimes distract me from reading." (S16)
- (20) "The font size was so small, so my eyes were strained, and sometimes I lost my concentration. I would love a bigger font size". (S17)

Previous research has also reported eyestrain as a difficulty in the online extensive reading programs (Bui & Macalister, 2021; Cote & Milliner, 2015). Reading texts over a long time on a computer or mobile phone could inevitably lead to eyestrain, so learners might need to make their plans to rest during their reading. An increased font size might also be considered to help make the texts more enjoyably readable to learners. Regarding the unattractive design, the finding was similar to Bui and Macalister's (2021). Online extensive reading websites might need to pay more attention to this matter.

Two students insisted on more topics and genres:

- (21) "Although there are a lot of topics and genres already, I still would love to read many more topics and genres to expand my knowledge." (S2)

It was interesting but not surprising that some learners still desired to read more topics and genres, which also resonated with Bui and Macalister (2021). However, it

is challenging to address all topics and genres because of the vast differences in learners' preferences.

Five students suggested more quizzes to enhance their understanding of the texts.

(22) "I would like to take more quizzes so that I could understand the texts better." (S7)

Some previous research supported the assessment of extensive reading (Ng et al., 2019; Tamrackitkun, 2010; Zhou & Day, 2021). Extensive reading is clearly for pleasure and information, but taking quizzes on the texts might encourage learners to take it more seriously and make more efforts to understand the texts.

Finally, technical issues, such as login time, slow loading, and system errors, were reported to be problematic by six learners.

(23) "I do not like that I have to log in every time I want to read and it doesn't remember my username and password". (S18)

(24) "It is annoying that sometimes the website doesn't respond, and I have to reload it." (S19)

(25) "Sometimes it loads very slowly, which is quite irritating to me." (S20)

Given that extensive online reading requires an internet connection, it is understandable that technical issues could occur and unavoidably have a negative impact on students' reading experiences, as was also found in Cote and Milliner's (2015) study.

5. CONCLUSION

The present study investigated Vietnamese EFL learners' perspectives on online extensive reading during emergency remote L2 teaching amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Through semi-structured interviews with the participants, the results showed that learners had positive attitudes towards online extensive reading because of its variety and suitability, usefulness, and convenience. Online extensive reading could offer reading texts of varied topics and genres reported suitable for learners' English proficiency. Online extensive reading was also claimed to enhance learners' English competence in different aspects, such as reading, grammar, and vocabulary. In addition, such features as self-tracked reading progress, enclosed dictionary definitions, or images were also favored by learners. A few issues, however, were also suggested to be addressed, such as the website interface, the addition of more topics and genres, quizzes, and technical errors.

The present study has several implications. It indicates that online extensive reading was generally enjoyed by Vietnamese EFL learners because of its distinctive features, such as convenience, suitability, and usefulness, so online extensive reading can be integrated into the L2 curriculum, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, learners' perspectives on how the website could be improved might be useful for those who consider setting up online extensive reading programs.

However, the study was not without limitations. First, the study involved only 87 students at a local university, so the results were just exploratory. A larger-scale study on more students at different universities might provide a more comprehensive picture of learners' perspectives on online extensive reading. Secondly, the study only

reported learners' beliefs, which leaves room for future research on the benefits of online extensive reading.

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