



Investigation of Attitudes and Barriers to Extensive Reading Project in Saudi Female English as a Foreign Language Preparatory Year Program Students and Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the attitudes of Saudi female EFL students and teachers, and the barriers to the uptake of the extensive reading program at a preparatory year program in Saudi Arabia. In order to enhance the effectiveness of the extensive reading research, a mixed method research design was employed using an online questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews in a Saudi university context. 111 Saudi female EFL students participated in the questionnaire. The quantitative result revealed positive attitudes toward extensive reading. It found that students understand the benefits and importance of reading extensively in the English language. In addition, interviews with six Saudi female EFL students and two Saudi female EFL teachers further demonstrated that students possess positive attitudes toward extensive reading programs supporting the quantitative findings. However, the qualitative interviews also highlighted the barriers to extensive reading related to the materials, students, teachers, program, and culture. Limitations, suggestions for the improvement of the existing extensive reading program at PYP, and recommendations for future research are also included.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is an essential skill for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Bamford and Day (1998) stated, in foreign language teaching situations (as opposed to second language teaching environments), speaking proficiency in a foreign language may be less important than reading proficiency. We learn to read through reading, which may be practised right from the start of language learning (Stoller, 2015; Day & Bamford, 2018; Renandya et al., 2020). According to Eskey (1986) “reading ... must be developed, and can only be developed, by means of extensive and continual practice. People learn to read, and to read better, by reading.”

(p.21). Furthermore, Krashen (1993) stated, “reading is good for you. The research supports a stronger conclusion, however. Reading is the only way, the only way we become good readers, develop a good writing style, an adequate vocabulary, advanced grammar, and the only way we become good spellers” (p.23). As such, reading is essential to improving language skills generally.

There are many benefits of reading extensively in EFL, and it extends beyond language learning. Reading can help readers acquire a wide range of cognitive skills and abilities, broaden their viewpoints, and improve their psychological, social, and academic well-being (Al-Mahrooqi, & Denman, 2018). Reading extensively can help EFL learners to improve their English academic skills. Extensive reading has been used in Saudi Arabia in EFL classes for many years. However, despite its many benefits, there are barriers to the uptake of extensive reading in Saudi EFL classes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature will explore what extensive reading is, briefly examine the benefits of reading extensively in the EFL context, and critically analyse the major barriers to extensive reading implementation.

What is Extensive Reading?

Extensive reading is a teaching and learning approach where students read vast amounts of books and materials within their language capabilities (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Extensive reading is also identified as "sustained silent reading" (Grabe, 2009) and "free voluntary reading" (Krashen, 2004). Students silently read simple self-selected books without solving any language activities subsequently (Park, 2020). Extensive reading benefits both first language (L1) and second language (L2) language learners for the development and enjoyment of the language learning process. EFL students read a significant number of easy and simple books and other reading materials to improve the English language in an environment that encourages them to develop a habit to continue reading throughout their lives to nurture a passion for reading for enjoyment. The pioneer in the investigation and promotion of extensive reading in L2 contexts, Day and Bamford (2002), compiled a list of ten principles of extensive reading, which can be used as guidelines, “not as rules that must be strictly followed” for implementing of extensive reading (Renandya et al., 2020, p. 18). Therefore, it is unnecessary to use all these ten principles strictly when implementing programs. The ten principles are:

1. The reading material is easy.
2. A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available.
3. Learners choose what they want to read.
4. Learners read as much as possible.
5. The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding.
6. Reading is its own reward.
7. Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower.
8. Reading is individual and silent.
9. Teachers orient and guide their students.
10. The teacher is a role model of a reader (p. 137-140).

Extensive Reading Benefits

There is considerable evidence of the positive effects of reading extensively on the English language learning of EFL students. Reading extensively has several distinctive characteristics that set it apart from regular ELT reading (Watkins, 2018b). Liu and Zhang (2018) meta-analysis found a huge effect on English vocabulary acquisition on students reading extensively. In addition, many studies aptly show reading extensively improves and enhances EFL students language learning such as vocabulary acquisition (e.g., Nation & Waring, 2019; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020), increase reading motivation, (e.g., Jeon & Day, 2016), positive reading attitudes (e.g., Puripunyanich, 2020), improve writing skills (e.g., Lee & Schallert, 2016), develop self-efficacy (e.g., Powell, 2005), stronger confidence (e.g., Safaeia & Bulca, 2013), improve reading proficiency (e.g., Boakye, 2017), increase knowledge of grammar (e.g., Lee et al., 2015), reading for pleasure outside class (e.g., Arnold, 2009) and broader understanding of the world (e.g., Watkins, 2018c). Even with the beneficial merits, it is still a rarely implemented form of language instruction (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002; Watkins, 2018b) because extensive reading has not always received the attention it deserves despite its benefits of varied exposure to meaningful language (Li et al., 2021).

Barriers to Extensive Reading

These are the significant vital barriers emerging from the literature related to materials, students, teachers, program and the culture.

Extensive Reading Resource Intensive

One of the key barriers to reading extensively lies in the resources. First, establishing and maintaining the project is quite expensive since it requires vast resources (Day & Bamford, 1998; Stewart, 2014). Consequently, Robb (2018) classifies Extensive Reading as "expensive reading" (p.1); as a consequence, it is restricted and inaccessible to students (Maley, 2009). Second, it is not easy to find large amounts of variety and appropriate reading materials for EFL students (Meniado, 2018; Watkins, 2018b), which is considered the extensive reading fundamental principle (Day & Bamford, 2002). Third, it affects the motivation of the students to read. Cheetham et al. (2016) showed that when students were restricted to choosing from a limited number of books, their motivation to read reduced. Therefore, various ranges and levels of books should be available to students to develop their motivation and interest in reading for pleasure.

The most often used books for extensive reading initiatives are so-called 'graded readers' – graded on the basis of lexical range and syntactic complexity. Such graded material, serving a range of levels, is necessary for L2 learners if the task of reading is to remain comfortable. Indeed, Meniado (2021) points out that extensive reading program success is built on this kind of graded material and that the programs cannot be implemented without these resources, although we should remember that they are expensive. However, clearly, the need to grade material will lead to some inauthenticity, particularly at lower levels. The limited vocabulary and relatively simple syntax are the price we pay for providing learners with a reading experience which is within their proficiency and in line with the principles of extensive reading in terms of providing a comfortable reading experience that promotes fluency. However, reading material can be simplified without necessarily becoming 'childish', a concern raised by Byun (2010).

Length of the Extensive Reading Program

Clearly, the longer the extensive reading program is sustained, the more likely learners are to see benefits (Nakanishi, 2015). Grabe (2009) argues that improved reading comprehension and competence in various other linguistic domains are the outcomes when extensive reading is constantly conducted over an extended period. Therefore, it is better to expose students to extensive reading as much as possible to provide maximum gains.

Effort and Time of Teacher

It requires a lot of effort and time from the teacher to implement extensive reading. Teachers have not always incorporated extensive reading because of the time commitment (Grabe, 2001) despite solid research evidence supporting the benefits of extensive reading and advice of the ELT professionals that it should be an essential part of a language curriculum (Renandya et al., 2015). In addition, it may not always be easy for teachers to expose students to extensive printed reading materials in the classroom (Chen, 2018) because they may have to focus on exam-oriented practice and supporting students in attaining grades (Maley, 2009). In fact, students are more likely to be aimless and meaningless readers without teachers' guidance in extensive reading (Khoonamri & Roostae, 2014). Therefore, time is sacrificed from class time for extensive reading to be achievable to implement guided in-class activities relating to the extensive reading material. However, when curriculum completion is the focus of the teachers, then it would not be easy to find additional time for the extensive reading integration in the classroom.

Arab Reading Culture

It seems the reading culture of some of the EFL students hinders the extensive reading. Several researchers have often claimed (Al-Musalli, 2014; Mahrooqi & Denman, 2016; Rajab & Al-Sadi, 2015) that many Arab countries lack a strong reading culture that Arabs frequently seem to have unfavourable attitudes concerning reading due to several factors. For example, the persistence of rich oral culture, and the diglossic nature of Arabic language (Emam et al., 2014; Gobert & Demirci, 2019), unawareness of effective strategies of reading (O'Sullivan, 2010), underdeveloped Arabic language (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012), lack of libraries, illiteracy of parents, and heavy homework load of students (Al-Musalli, 2014). Similarly, Al-Qahtani (2016) states that reading is not popular in the Saudi community. Like other Arab societies, Saudi society also lacks a strong reading culture, even in their native language (Al-Nafisah, 2015), making it highly challenging to develop and maintain an extensive English reading program in Saudi Arabia (Meniado, 2021). In short, some Arab students do not like to read as much.

There is, perhaps, some evidence; however, that is not the case with all Arab students. The principal outcome of Al-Musalli's study (2014) reveals that teachers and the general public have a fundamental misinterpretation of "The Reading Culture" or "Being Reading Oriented" in Omani students (p.220). According to the English teachers' questionnaire results at the university level in Oman, having a reading culture desires or tends to read in English. Likewise, the study findings by Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015) recognized that it may be unfair and needless to generalise and designate Saudi students as "non-readers." Saudi students who are not driven or interested in most printed materials nowadays might be better described as "low reading motivated." (Rajab & Al-Sadi, 2015). Surprisingly, Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2018) found that about half of the research participants regularly read despite many researchers claiming that Arabs lack a reading culture. Most of them listed reading as one of their hobbies. Although it could be argued that

some Arab regions do not develop a reading culture, it does not act as a necessity for an individual to pick up books on their own.

Attitudes of EFL Students towards Extensive Reading

There are different attitudes EFL students display when it comes to reading extensively. Al-Homoud and Alsalloum (2012) found that extensive reading is more effective at changing students' attitudes toward learning a new language. Ng et al. (2019) claim that students' emotional state, or how they think and feel, is vital to developing their reading skills. Many studies have looked into various parts of extensive reading and found evidence that it positively impacts EFL students' attitudes and English skills development. Huang (2015) recognized the importance of understanding the attitudes of L2 learners regarding reading is seen to be crucial to increasing their participation in extensive reading. He found that students in Taiwan didn't participate in extensive English reading due to numerous schools demands and the perception that it would not help them thrive in tests and educational achievement. The school or college workload affects students' perception of reading extensively. Another study conducted by Wisaijorn (2017) investigated the extensive reading impact on the competency and attitudes toward English reading in 51 fourth-year Thai undergraduates for 15 weeks. The students' attitudes toward reading in English were positively influenced by extensive reading.

It is argued that reading for pleasure can alter the EFL students' reading attitude towards reading, reading motivation, and reading habits. For example, Rodrigo et al. (2014) found that extensive reading program participants had a positive reading attitude, motivation to read, and a reading habit influenced by enjoyment and accomplishment. In other words, students can be motivated to keep reading through extensive reading by a sense of pleasure and accomplishment (Ro, 2013).

Extensive Reading Inclusion in Curriculum

Some teachers are reluctant to implement extensive reading if it is not included in the curriculum and assessment. On the other hand, teachers are more inclined to try extensive reading if incorporated into the school curriculum (Tien, 2015). One of the barriers to implementing the project is the teachers' reluctance to move outside the stated curriculum in Saudi Arabia (Al-Nafisah, 2015). As such, teachers' attitude toward the project plays an essential role in its implementation because their beliefs can have a long-term impact on teachers' instructional methods, claims Phipps and Borg (2009). Hence, EFL teachers avoid implementing extensive reading because their complete focus is on completing the curriculum and preparing EFL students for examinations.

Moreover, EFL students focus on the materials required for the assessment due to the grades. According to Meniado (2021), many Arab EFL students are grade-driven; therefore, they only engage in it primarily for their extensive reading grades rather than for their benefit. Thus, the most effective technique to get students to read is incorporating extensive reading into the language curriculum (Green, 2005). As Watkins (2018a) has convincingly claimed, "learners need to be motivated to read" (p.14). External motivations, such as gaining a course credit or acquiring an award, can be utilised to start the reading journey of the EFL students and progressively inspire them to read books autonomously before they have the intrinsic motivation to read for their benefit (Chang & Renandya, 2017). The Chang and Renandya (2017) study suggest that EFL teachers can ask students to read during curriculum time when they incorporate extensive reading into the curriculum. Therefore, it becomes easier to implement extensive

reading if it is part of the curriculum and assessment. Nevertheless, the problem would be finding a credible and trustworthy assessment method for extensive reading (Macalister, 2010).

Extensive Reading Monitoring and Assessment

The only way to legitimise extensive reading is to establish it as a part of the curriculum and assessment; however, a possible drawback is the monitoring and evaluation of the program. Teachers face difficulties while monitoring students during extensive reading and identifying if students are reading thoroughly and efficiently (Stewart, 2014). The Chang and Renandya (2017) study showed that one of the challenges EFL teachers faced was keeping track of what and how much their students read and holding them responsible for their work. Arai (2019), Meniado (2021) and Tagane et al. (2018) argue that EFL teachers have observed "student academic dishonesty" in their extensive reading assignments. It is hard to detect dishonesty in (online) quizzes, monitor cheating in written reports, and follow the switching or spreading of reading reports between different sections or campuses because of the big number of EFL students in programs in institutions, including the teachers' excessive workload (Meniado, 2021).

Extensive reading assignments such as completing reading logs, book review sheets and written records were the most common ways used by instructor participants to track their students' reading. However, Chang and Renandya (2017) suggest that teachers can now monitor whether students read in various convenient and valuable ways through books and online. First, Oxford Bookworms series, Cambridge English Readers, and MacMillan Readers are for those teachers, especially those who want to give quizzes to the students after reading, but don't have access to technology to monitor students' reading. Second, online tests are available, for example, Robb's Moodle Reader and Goldberg's X readers. EFL instructors will not be overworked. Students can read whatever they choose, and then take a quiz after reading their book. Although ER is not associated with testing, there is some evidence that after-reading quizzes do not harm students' reading attitudes. On the contrary, students who completed quizzes gained more significant intellectual benefits from reading extensively (Stoeckel et al., 2012).

Lack of Awareness of Extensive Reading Benefits

Another barrier to implementing extensive reading seems to be the poor introduction and students' lack of awareness of the benefits of extensive reading. Waring (2011) pointed out that one of the most common reasons for a failure is a poorly designed and implemented introduction of extensive reading. Orientation of the extensive reading program is not simply introducing reading, and requires students to take their books home. In addition, Waring (2011) claims this approach might likely elicit resistance, particularly if the task is added, or if students are unaware of why they are doing it or how it improves them. Watkins (2018b) convincingly argues that learners will be more inclined to participate in the program if they understand the benefits, irrespective of whether they enjoy reading. In addition, Rahmawati's (2018) study illustrated that students believed reading may be enjoyable if they "knew what to read, how to read, and why they read" (p.130). As Watkins (2018b) states, if teachers encourage reading extensively, it is mainly for the benefit of language acquisition rather than reading for pleasure. Hence, an awareness of the benefits of extensive reading is essential to change their attitudes towards reading for benefits and pleasure.

Teacher's Role in Extensive Reading Implementation

The role of the teacher is crucial in the implementation of extensive reading in the classroom. Without any doubt, it makes extensive reading learning more engaging inside the classroom as claimed by Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2014). According to the extensive reading principle of Day and Bamford (2002), teachers' critical role in extensive reading implementation is that of a role model who participates in the program with their students as avid readers. Many researchers defined the role of the teacher in different ways. For example, Yamashita (2013) describes teachers' roles as "program manager and reading advisor" (p. 251), whereas Sze (1999) and Watkins (2018c) define them as motivators and monitors. The success of the program greatly relies on the teacher's participation as a role model, supporter, motivator and a monitor.

In conclusion, the literature review explored what extensive reading is and investigated the evidence on the benefits of reading extensively on the language learning of the EFL students. Furthermore, the last section of the review examined the key barriers to implementing extensive reading and also suggested ways in which those barriers could be overcome. Although the previous studies identified the attitudes and barriers of extensive reading in EFL students and in Saudi male EFL students, yet, they fail to specifically specify research studies on Saudi female EFL students. Therefore, this research study will attempt to develop a comprehensive understanding of the Saudi female EFL students' attitudes and the barriers of reading extensively in order to fill the research gap.

METHODOLOGY

This sequential explanatory mixed method study addresses the following research questions.

Research Questions

1. What are the attitudes of the Saudi female EFL students to the extensive reading project of the university?
2. What are the attitudes of the Saudi female EFL teachers to the extensive reading project of the university?
3. What solutions can be suggested to overcome the barriers to extensive reading in the Saudi context?

Data Collection

To investigate the students' reading attitudes and barriers in the implementation of an extensive reading program, two instruments were employed to collect the primary data: 1) an online questionnaire and 2) semi-structured interviews.

Online Questionnaire

An online Google Forms questionnaire was created to find the reading attitudes and habits of the female students. The nineteen questions of the questionnaire were adapted from two already published research studies. At the start of the online questionnaire, a consent paragraph, a summary of the research study, the contact information of the researcher, and a participant information sheet link were added. Arabic translation of the English research questions was provided for low-level students to better comprehend the questions. At the end of the

questionnaire, the research participants were asked to leave their email addresses if they wanted to be contacted for follow-up interviews.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were employed in this research study. The reason to employ semi-structured interviews was that it provides flexibility (Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015). For the semi-structured interviews, questions were adapted from the already published extensive reading study. There were 13 questions in total with follow-up questions. The questionnaire and the interviews were piloted before conducting them with the research participants.

The Population and Sample

The population of the study was 18-20 years old PYP Saudi female EFL students studying in Saudi Arabia. The study applied a non-probability sampling method. An online questionnaire was sent to 30-40 Saudi female EFL students and a follow-up interview with six students. In addition, two teachers were interviewed. The researcher (author 1) wanted to recruit more teachers, but due to their workload, it was not possible to reach out to more than 2 teachers.

The researcher (author 1) employed “purposive and convenience sampling” for the sample collection (Creswell, 2012) because with convenience sampling the researcher was able to reach out to colleagues and college students easily and is cost-effective, simple, and the subjects are easily reachable (Etikan et al., 2016). Following the purposive sampling criteria of deliberate selection of a participant based on specific attributes (Etikan et al., 2016), the inclusion criteria of the research participants were the Saudi female EFL students who studied the extensive reading project in the PYP and EFL teachers who taught the extensive reading project.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data from questionnaires and semi-structured interviews are presented separately for analysis and discussion, both thematically and in relation to specific research questions. Questionnaire answers the research question 1 whereas semi-structured interviews answers research questions 1, 2 and 3 of the study.

Exploratory Factor Analysis Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the attitudes of the Saudi female EFL students to the extensive reading project of the university?

The survey examined the RQ 1 of reading attitudes of Saudi Female EFL students. According to the quantitative data derived from the reading attitude questionnaire, each participant had a positive view towards reading in English. Six constructs were identified, which are ‘Importance of learning English’ (Construct C1), ‘Reading text difficulty level’ (C2), ‘Awareness of improved reading abilities outside the class’ (C3), ‘Reading outside of the classroom enhances learning’ (C4), ‘Positive attitudes learning English sub-skills’, (C5) and ‘Positive effects of Reading in English’ (C6). The overall result of the survey presented

encouraging evidence of positive attitudes of students toward reading English, its importance in improving their English language, knowledge of the world, and for their career prospects. It is worth noting that 97.3% of the female students believe English is important for their future careers. 88.5% of the students also agree that reading in English can be an enjoyable activity which supports the claim of Day and Bamford (2002) that “the purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure” (p.137-140). 71.1% of the students agree that they feel anxious if they didn’t know all the words when they read in English. This finding is in line with Day and Bamford (2002) who suggest that the reading material should be easy for extensive reading.

Looking at the percentage of the six constructs, the average agreement of construct (C1) is 58%, which shows more than half of the students understood the importance of learning English. As for the ‘Reading text difficulty level’ (C2), the average agreement was 55.98%, which depicts that more than half of the students do not read because they feel reading in English is difficult for them. This result supports Day and Bamford’s (2002) claim, which suggests that the reading material should be easy for extensive reading. The average agreement of construct (C3) ‘Awareness of improved reading abilities outside the class’ was 66.9%, which shows students agree they learn English better if they read outside of the classroom. This demonstrates that extensive reading is an effective program where mainly reading is conducted outside of the classroom. Construct (C4) ‘Reading outside of the classroom enhances learning’ average agreement is 75.5%, which is the second highest percentage in all the six constructs after construct (C6).

The average disagreement of the construct (C5) ‘Positive attitudes learning English sub-skills’ was 49.5% which shows that there is a lack of awareness that students can learn other things such as grammar through extensive reading outside the classroom. This result is not in line with other research studies, which suggest that extensive reading improves knowledge of grammar (e.g., Song & Sardegna, 2014). It seems students have a general perception that students learn grammar only in the classroom with the teacher and not outside of the classroom through reading extensively. However, 49.5% of the students believe they learn vocabulary through reading outside of the class. This result is in line with many research studies, which also found that extensive reading improves vocabulary acquisition (e.g., Horst, 2005; Liu & Zhang, 2018; Nation & Waring, 2019; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020; Seidenberg, 2017; Verhoeven & Perfetti, 2017).

Construct (C6) ‘Positive effects of Reading in English’ had the highest average agreement of 82.5%. It clearly demonstrates that students agree that reading in English has a positive effect, such as a broad knowledge of the culture and the world. This finding contributes to support the claim of Renandya (2016) and Watkins (2018c) who suggest that students also develop a deeper and broader understanding of the world in addition to language benefits, which is essential for responding to and interacting with the topic and other people. Overall, students have positive reading attitudes regardless of whether they read or not, which is in line with the findings of many research studies in the EFL context (e.g., Chen et al., 2013; Sun, 2003; Puripunyanich, 2021) and Saudi EFL context too (Abdellah, 2013; Al-Hammad, 2009; Al-Homoud & Alsalloum, 2012; Al-Mansour & AlShorman, 2014; Al-Nafisah, 2015; and Salameh, 2017). However, teachers need to provide a thorough awareness of the benefits of the extensive reading project before the beginning of the session.

Qualitative Data Analysis: Thematic Analysis Results and Discussion

The qualitative data answered the three research questions of the study. The results and discussion of RQ, RQ2 and RQ3 are presented and critically analysed. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with six Saudi female EFL students and two teachers at the PYP in Saudi Arabia. Below are the demographic characteristics of the students:

- The respondents were all preparatory year program students.
- All the students were 18-19 year old Saudi females.
- They all took an extensive reading project at the preparatory year program.

Teacher's demographic characteristics:

- All teachers taught extensive reading project for more than 2 years.
- Both teachers teach General English at the preparatory year program.
- Both teachers have more than 5 experience in EFL teaching to Saudi female EFL students.

Research Question 1: What are the attitudes of the Saudi female EFL students to the extensive reading project of the university?

Research Question 2: What are the attitudes of the Saudi female EFL teachers to the extensive reading project of the university?

All the students (n=6) and teachers (n=2) reported positive attitudes towards the extensive reading program. Student 4 reported: *"I learned new vocabulary and my reading fluency improved."* Teacher 1 mentioned: *"Graded readers help students to improve their English language, especially vocabulary and reading fluency."* The students and teachers believed that the program developed English language skills and was an enjoyable experience with improved vocabulary acquisition and reading fluency being the most frequently cited areas of improvement. In addition, improvement in writing, critical thinking, creativity, pronunciation, and confidence was expressed. These findings are in line with many extensive reading research studies, previously reported.

Research Question 3: What solutions can be suggested to overcome the barriers to extensive reading in the Saudi context?

1. Materials Related Barriers

a. Lack of Extensive Reading Resources

Students had mixed experiences locating appropriate material. Student 1 mentioned: *"I had a pdf of the book, but I prefer a hardcover book to read."* Student 3 reported: *"I was able to find the book easily from the bookstore."* Student 5 said: *"I was not able to find the hard copy of the book."* Student 6 mentioned: *"The reading book was hard to find. I found a pdf of the book, but I like to have a hardcover book to enjoy reading."* This finding supports Meniado (2018), and Watkins (2018b) claim that it is not easy to find large amounts of variety and appropriate reading materials for EFL students. Similarly, both teachers also mentioned that the unavailability of a vast variety

of books for an extensive reading program is a problem students face during the selection of the books at the start of the semester. Teacher 1 reported: *"There are not many books available. I hear this all the time from my students every term."* Teacher 2 mentioned: *"Students find difficulty in finding books for extensive reading. There is a lack of variety and culturally appropriate books."*

b. Number of Books Read in the Extensive Reading Program

Teachers and students expressed different views on the ideal number of books to read during the term. Student 1 and 3 mentioned: *"I think we need to read five books a month."* Other students agreed: *"When you read more, you learn more. I think 2-3 books in a month."* As for the teachers, Teacher 1 said: *"We can leave the open choice for the students to read as much as possible. 5 books minimum is a good number."* Teacher 2 mentioned: *"1 book a term would be fine to focus more."* However, all of them (n=8) agreed that students could read five or more books in the program. These findings suggest that students want to read more.

c. Difficulty Level of the Books

All the students felt the book was easy for them and they would like to read a slightly higher-level book to learn new words. Student 2 said: *"I want to read English books that are a level higher than mine to learn new words."* Student 4 mentioned: *"Students should be allowed to read at any level if they like the topic or cannot find an engaging topic."* However, Student 6 reported: *"I learned lots of new words (synonyms) because the words in the story were easy."* This result is in line with Sun (2020) who found in interviews or in reading notebooks that some advanced and upper-intermediate students stated that linguistically demanding books were more engaging and motivating than easy books.

d. Benefits of Graded Readers

Two students and a teacher mentioned that graded readers are beneficial to use in extensive reading. Student 3 said: *"It can help you in the English language, especially the vocabulary at the back of the book, which is not present in the Arabic books."* Student 5 mentioned: *"I liked the graded reader books because it has a CD and you can listen while reading. It also has a glossary at the back of the book, which helps in understanding the meaning of the words. I also like to do the quizzes at the back of the book."* Teacher 1 mentioned: *"The graded books have a CD to improve pronunciation."*

2. Students Related Barriers

a. Reading for Grades and not Pleasure

Teachers and students mentioned that students mostly read for marks and not for pleasure. Student 5 said: *"If the reading book is assessed, then students will only read for marks and not for pleasure. Students who do not like to read, they will have to read because of the assessment. Some students will read books even without assessment because they want to learn English."* This finding supports Meniado (2021) who found that many Arab EFL students are grade-driven; therefore, they only engage in it primarily for their extensive reading grades rather than for their benefit. One teacher reported that pleasure comes with time in reading. *"Low level students find it difficult to enjoy the book because they do not understand it and to enjoy reading a book, you need to understand it. Low level students translate the book to understand. Advanced level students can have pleasure. Marks are the basis of motivation to read. Extrinsic motivation is important to*

encourage reading and pleasure comes with time.” This finding is in consistent with Chang and Renandya (2017) who suggest external motivations, such as gaining a course credit or acquiring an award, can be utilized to start the reading journey of the EFL students and progressively inspire them to read books autonomously before they have the intrinsic motivation to read for their benefit.

b. Reasons for Not Reading in English

Different students mentioned different reasons for not reading extensively. One student reported that she dislikes reading because she prefers listening. Student 2 reported *“I do not read because I will take a major which does not require the English language.”* One teacher mentioned students simply prefer other activities to reading, *“They watch movies in English, use applications such as TikTok, and prefer games for learning a language because they find reading as a boring activity.”* Student 1 mentioned: *“I did not read English books because I thought I could only learn English through English textbooks. Learning through English is a new thing for me.”* Student 3 said: *“I stopped reading now because of the college workload, but I will continue when I finish my studies.”* Thus, there are different reasons of students for not reading extensively in English.

c. Low Level Students English Reading Abilities

Some students (n= 3) and teachers (n=2) mentioned low level English reading abilities as a barrier to extensive reading. Student 2 said: *“I read in L1 only because I felt I did not have the language to read in English.”* Advanced level students did not find any difficulty due to their English language skills. Teacher 1 reported: *“English language is an obstacle to read in English”.* Teacher 2 said: *“Students who say they read in Arabic are the ones who read in English too. Students who do not read struggle a lot. Low-level students face challenges in extensive reading due to language. I believe advanced level students are the ones who read because you can see it in their reading skills.”* This finding supports Al-Qahtani (2016) and Bendriss & Golkowska (2011) who found that various studies, teachers, and university lecturers have identified poor English reading abilities as a significant issue for Arab students, including Saudi students because they do not read enough or at all. Hence, if students try to read even at a lower level, they would improve their English language.

d. Awareness of Extensive Reading Benefits

All the students do understand that the extensive reading program contributes to their improved English language. Student 5 said: *“I understand that students learn new words, and improve their vocabulary through an extensive reading program.”* Student 6 mentioned: *“No idea! I am hearing this term (extensive reading) for the first time, but I understand that you learn new vocabulary, and have fun reading especially fictional stories because I can imagine the characters and feel happy.”* Teacher 1 reported: *“Students know about the benefits, but the focus is on grades and assessment.”* This finding supports the claim of Watkins (2018b) who convincingly argues that learners will be more inclined to participate in the program if they understand the benefits, irrespective of whether they enjoy reading. Hence, if students are fully aware of the benefits of extensive reading, they would participate more in reading extensively.

3. Teacher Related Barriers

a. Extensive Reading Monitoring

Both teachers mentioned challenges in monitoring students during the extensive reading program because it is carried out outside the classroom. Teacher 1 mentioned: *“Students copy from other students, but they will still gain from the course even they do the minimum.”* Teacher 2 said: *“It is hard to know if the students read the book or not.”* This finding is consistent with Meniado (2021) who found that it is hard to detect dishonesty in (online) quizzes, monitor cheating in written reports, and follow the switching or spreading of reading reports between different sections or campuses because of the big number of EFL students in programs in institutions, including the teachers’ excessive workload.

b. In-Class Activities of Extensive Reading

To overcome this problem, the two teachers suggest having in class reading with different reading activities such as class discussions, quizzes, or creating a reading club. All the six students also expressed to have more teacher guidance during the extensive reading program through in class activities such as class discussions, silent reading, creating a reading club, and vocabulary sharing activities. Student 1 said: *“It will be enjoyable if we read with classmates. Like discussions in groups of our books.”* Student 6 reported: *“Students can read silently and follow up the discussion because it will be fun.”* As such, teacher’s involvement will enhance the ER.

c. Limited Time of Teachers

However, both the teachers mentioned their concern regarding the lack of time they have in class to complete the curriculum. Teacher 1 mentioned: *“Teachers are overwhelmed with work and there is no time for extensive reading in class. If extensive reading is done in the class, the teacher can monitor, but again, teachers need to complete the curriculum. Teachers have a limited amount of time. Silent reading is boring for students.”* Teacher 2 said: *“Reading should be done in class to make sure if students are reading and, in this way, they can discuss with their classmates too, but the problem is the time. Outside the class it is difficult to monitor.”* This finding is in line with Maley (2009) who claims that it requires a lot of effort and time from the teacher to implement extensive reading in the class.

4. Program Related Barriers

a. Extensive Reading Inclusion in Assessment

The teachers (n=2) and the students (n=6) reported that extensive reading should be part of the assessment, otherwise no one will read. Student 4 mentioned: *“Students will not read if it is not part of the assessment.”* Teacher 1 mentioned: *“Students only read for marks.”* This finding is in line with Green (2005) who claims that the most effective technique to get students to read is incorporating extensive reading into the language curriculum.

b. Alternative Assessment of Current ER program

All the students mentioned that the current assessment of the programme did not support extensive reading with a vocabulary assignment requiring the identification and study of a number of unknown words. Presentations are also currently used as part of the assessment but the students expressed some concern over the requirements of these and a teacher added: *“I am not sure if the*

creative output presentation is a good assessment or if there are alternatives we can use.” These findings are in line with Macalister (2010) who claims that if extensive reading is made part of the assessment, then the problem would be finding a credible and trustworthy assessment method for extensive reading.

c. Length of the Extensive Reading Program

Due to the positive outcomes of the extensive reading program, all the students expressed a desire to further extend the program to the next term of the preparatory year program. For example, Student 2 reported: *“There should be an extensive reading project in the 002 level too.”*

5. Culture Related Barrier

a. Arab Reading Culture

Five out of six students mentioned that they have read an English book for the first time in college. Student 1 said: *“The first English book I read was in extensive reading.”* Student 4 reported: *“In Extensive reading project, I read the first English book.”* Student 5 said: *“I read an English book for the first time in ER. My English was not good, that is why I did not read in English.”* This finding supports the claims of Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2014), Al-Musallam (2009), and Al-Qahtani (2016) who found reading in Arabic and English is uncommon among Saudi students. However, we should be cautious in overgeneralizing this point.

One student and one teacher mentioned that there is no Arab reading culture. Student 2 said: *“Arab society does not read and no one at school encourages to read or at home. Saudi youth reads novels and magazines which are unbeneficial.”* Teacher 1 reported: *“Students have no reading habits in English. There is no reading culture, but it does not mean students do not read. It also depends if parents encourage their children to read at an early age at home. It can be in L1 or L2.”* This finding is in line with the results of Rajab and Al-Sadi (2015) who recognized that it may be unfair and needless to generalise and designate Saudi students as “non-readers.” In addition, the result is in line with Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2018) who found that about half of the Omani research participants regularly read, despite many researchers claiming that Arabs lack a reading culture. It seems there is a misconception about Arab reading culture and it is a huge generalisation that Arab society does not read.

CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS

The respondents in this sample already hold reasonably positive attitudes to ER, and understand the potential vocabulary gains from engaging in the programme. However, these views may be strengthened if teachers also explicitly explain the benefits to grammar development, writing, and all forms of reading, including reading for detail.

It is clear that to say that there is no reading culture in Saudi Arabia is at best a generalisation. However, some learners did report that they were reading books in English for the first time. It is crucial that teachers model reading and discuss their own experiences of reading in other languages and the benefits it has brought them. In addition, any other people who read in English and would be good role models (doctors, journalists, business people and so on) may be encouraged to make short recordings that could be used in class. In this way, the microculture of the classroom is transformed into one where reading in an L2 is normal and expected. This would also provide useful listening input and discussion opportunities.

Some students were put off reading by the difficulty of the texts, while others felt they would learn more with more challenging texts. As there is ER material even for quite low learners, it may be that the perceived difficulty is linked to confidence and an expectation of failure. In this case, there would be a benefit to introducing ER gradually and at the earliest stage of English learning that is possible in the education system. This could take the form of a teacher reading to learners as they follow the text. Early exposure to short, but regular, episodes of reading may help to build confidence over time and counter the fear of failure.

There is a clear belief that engagement is dictated by assessment and grades and this may lead to learners not doing as much reading as desirable if they can still obtain the grade they want. Alternative assessment formats could be experimented with. The learners expressed a desire to discuss the books they read. If the whole class read the same book (admittedly not desirable from the perspective of choice) teachers could easily design fairly traditional assessments around reading texts. For example, learners could be given a short extract and asked to comment (either in discussion or through writing) on the importance of the passage to the narrative, character or some other aspect of the book. If ideas about, and references to, the book were assessed (rather than spoken or written accuracy) it would form a valid and reliable assessment that would require the learners to have read, and perhaps re-read, the text.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the central barrier to the use of extensive reading seems to be a lack of the awareness of its benefits among Saudi female EFL students in public schools. There remains a belief that the English language can only be learned through textbooks and not through reading extensively. Further research is required to see if these beliefs can be challenged through interventions that explain the potential linguistic benefits of extensive reading. In addition, positive attitudes were expressed about extensive reading and there was a desire for the current program to be extended. If the program can be resourced with appropriate graded material and the assessment modified to encourage the process of extensive reading, there may be opportunities for learners to reap the rewards of reading in English.

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