

## Abstract:

Extensive Reading has been acknowledged by researchers and teachers of its educational benefits to students. However, it has not received a deserving place in English classes in Vietnam, especially in rural areas. This presentation describes a student-run library project to promote Extensive Reading which has been implemented in School of Foreign Languages - Thai Nguyen University (SFL - TNU) including two main sections. First, the paper describes how the library was set up and operated in the context of a regional university with limited resources, what benefits it is expected to bring to students, and how teachers are using the materials in their classrooms. Second, the paper investigates data of books that students have borrowed from the library and data from interviews with students and teachers in SFL-TNU to answer questions:

1. What type of books are students interested in?
2. What benefits does the project bring to students and teachers?
3. What do teachers and students suggest for the project to improve?

Results of the paper suggest what materials may be used for reading classes and future Extensive Reading projects in Vietnam to encourage students to read. Also, the project may serve as a model for small projects to promote the use of Extensive Reading and exploit Extensive Reading resources in ELT in the settings of regional universities.

## **A Student-run Library and How It Can Be Done with Limited Resources**

### **Introduction**

Extensive Reading has been proven to have considerable effects in developing language skills and promoting reading habits to students. However, it has not been applied extensively in ESL programs and in universities. There are many challenges that contribute to the absence of Extensive Reading programs in Vietnamese universities, especially in regional universities. This paper aims to suggest an alternative approach to promote Extensive Reading in this context. It describes a project which has been carried out in School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University and its benefits to teachers and students.

### **ER, its Benefits, and Why It Is Not Popular**

According to Carell & Carson (1997, pp.49 - 50), Extensive Reading “generally involves rapid reading of large quantities of material or longer readings (e.g. whole books) for general understanding, with the focus generally on the meaning of what is being read than on the language.”

In English Language Teaching in particular, an Extensive Reading program is defined as “a supplementary class library scheme, attached to an English course, in which pupils are given the time, encouragement, and materials to read pleasurably, at their own level, as many books as they can, without the pressures of testing or marks.

Davis (1995, p.329)

Based on these characteristics and multiple researches and suggestions of leading scholars in the field, Renandya (2007, pp.144 - 145) compiled a list of seven principles to build a successful Extensive Reading program:

1. Students read large amounts of material
2. Students usually choose what they want to read
3. Reading materials vary in terms of topic and genre
4. The material students read is within their level of comprehension
5. Students usually take part in post-reading activities
6. Teachers read with their students, thus modeling enthusiasm for reading
7. Teachers and students keep track of student progress

It is commonly agreed among scholars that Extensive Reading programs are beneficial to students in many ways, some of which include:

1. enhanced language learning in such areas as spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and text structure
2. increased knowledge of the world
3. improved reading and writing skills
4. greater enjoyment of reading
5. more positive attitude toward reading
6. higher possibility of developing a reading habit

(Renandya & Jacobs, 2002, p. 298)

Additionally, there is a large number of empirical evidence which proves the benefits of Extensive Reading. Nakanishi (2014) carried out a meta-analysis of 34 researches with a sample size of 3942 participants and concluded that Extensive Reading programs improved students' reading proficiency and that Extensive Reading programs should be included in the curricula.

However, it does not seem that Extensive Reading has been extensively incorporated into English language programs. There may be many reasons for this absence. First, teachers believe that intensive reading only is sufficient to improve students' reading skill (Day & Bamford, 1998). Second, teachers do not have enough time in class as they have to follow a strict syllabus, or they would like to spend time on assessed content (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). Other reasons may include the lack of teacher's awareness of the nature and benefits of Extensive Reading and the absence of assessment for Extensive Reading (Macalister, 2010).

From my experience in School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University, teachers here have the following reasons not to implement Extensive Reading programs. First, teachers are not aware of Extensive Reading or they believe that Extensive Reading is not important to students. Second, there is not enough time in class and space in the syllabus for Extensive Reading. Third, materials for Extensive Reading are not available. Finally, students are not enthusiastic in reading. These might apply to other regional university as well.

These challenges make it difficult to implement an Extensive Reading program as a part of a course, or as an extra course like how most Extensive Reading programs are usually carried out. Therefore, there is a need for a more flexible approach for this context.

### **A Student-run Library Project**

School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University locates in Thai Nguyen province, Vietnam. It is a regional university which offers programs on English Language, English Language Education, English – Chinese/French/Russian, and other languages. The majority of students come from rural areas in the North of Vietnam and they start university with little or no competence to communicate in English. Female students outnumber male students. Before this project, no similar library and no Extensive Reading programs have been implemented in the school.

The library was created for two main goals. First, it was to provide easy and interesting materials to encourage students and teachers to read extensively. Second, it was to serve as a source of authentic materials for teachers to use in the language skill classroom and projects. Third, it is to provide support for research on Extensive Reading.

The project is operated as an interest club of students in which a group of students volunteered to run the project, organize materials, promote the project, and hold regular activities and events. It consists of reading materials and a reading room. Books and funding are donated by the Department of English and individual sponsors. The reading room is shared with the Department's office.

The library opens six days a week during the semester; it closes on Monday and holidays. Materials are organized according to genres, topics, and levels. Graded readers and other favorite reading materials are put on the most appealing places. Each item is given a code and

their list is stored online. Each student can borrow one book for a week. If they do not return the book on time, they have to pay a small fine for every late day.

All promotions of the project, including events and related activities, are designed and carried out by students. The project's website and facebook page in English are also created and updated by students. All events and activities of the project are proposed and held by students with support and supervision from the teachers. Volunteers have regular online or face-to-face meetings with or without the supervising teacher to discuss on the project's activities and suggest ideas for future development. Any volunteer who has idea for an event are encouraged to propose it in group's meeting, then other students will discuss and help develop the idea into a detailed plan.

The project is an alternative for Extensive Reading programs. It has most characteristics of a successful Extensive Reading programs in Renandya (2007).

First, the amount of materials that students read will accumulate with time as they continue to borrow books from the library during their time in college. Second, the main activity of the library is to open for students and teachers to borrow books for free. This means that students are free to choose what they want to read. Third, reading materials are diverse in terms of topics and genres. The library contains 253 items which are divided into four main categories: Graded readers (fiction and non-fiction), Children books (nursery – K7-8), novels, and others (including brochures, magazines, travel guides, etc.). Material levels range from Beginner to Advanced. Fourth, because there are reading materials in various levels, students can choose to read those within their level of comprehension or challenge themselves with books of higher levels. Fifth, post-reading activities are designed by students as events of the project, for example, writing reviews, communicating with sponsors, etc. Sixth, students could borrow books together and read together, which raises their motivation to read. In other words, even when teachers do not read with students, students may still be enthusiastic with reading because other students around them are. However, teachers and students cannot keep track of their reading progress because teachers are not involved in students' reading.

Category	No. of Books
Graded Readers	45
Children books	74
Novels	86
Others	48
<b>Total</b>	<b>253</b>

Table 1: No. of Books

Additionally, this alternative approach has some characteristics that made it appropriate for regional universities. First, it is economical and sustainable, as most resources are donated from sponsors and the resources could be used not only for Extensive Reading programs, but also for many different purposes. Second, it does not require extra space in the syllabus or curriculum. This is because students could read books and join activities in their free time, and teachers could use the books as extra materials in their classroom or as homework.

Therefore, the project is expected to have benefits of an Extensive Reading programs even though these benefits may not be visible in a short term. Besides these, the project is also expected to have other benefits to students and teachers. First, it offers volunteer students with

opportunities to learn 21<sup>st</sup> centuries skills through working in groups, discussing and planning activities, holding events, etc. Second, it provides teachers with authentic materials to use in their classrooms and provides supports for research on Reading and Extensive Reading.

### Results of the Project

The library opened for readers in October 2016. It was closed in January for New Year and the late part of May for students' final exam. Out of more than 1000 students of English in School of Foreign Languages, approximately 400 students have borrowed from the library. Up to now, the library has run for seven months with a total of 103 days when it actually opened. Students have borrowed from the library 434 times, with an average of 4.21 times a day. The number of books students read at the library room was not recorded.

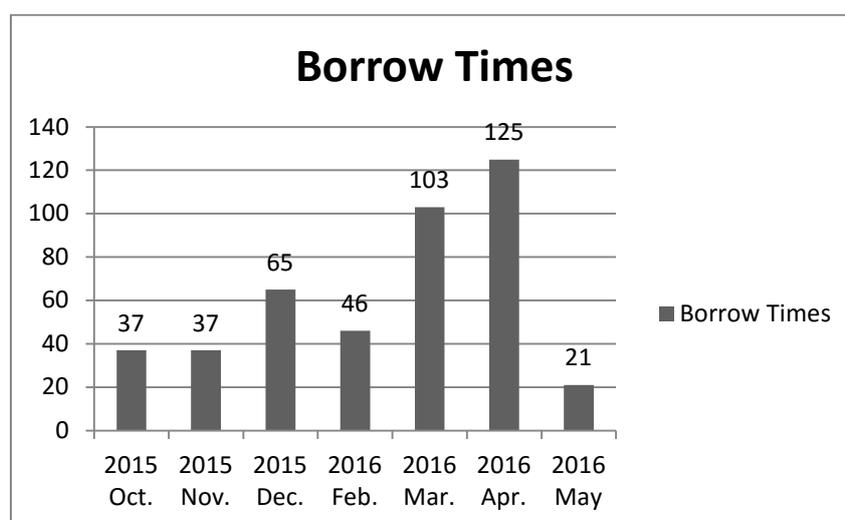


Chart 1: Borrow Times Each Month

The chart shows the number of borrow times every month. According to the chart, the number of times students borrow from the library gradually increases with the exception of February and May. This means that more and more students borrow books from the library. The slight decrease in February may be the result of a half-month break for the Lunar New Year. The sudden drop in May might be caused by the final exam that students have in May and June.

*What type of books are students interested in?*

There are 253 items in the library. They are divided into four categories: Graded Readers, Children's books, Novels, and Others (magazines, brochures, etc.).

Category	No. of Books	Times Borrowed	Times Borrowed per day
Graded Readers	45	210	2.03
Children's books	74	49	1.53*
Novels	86	93	0.90
Others	48	82	0.80
<b>Total</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>434</b>	

Table 2: No. of Books and Times Borrowed

\* As children books were donated in April, its borrowing frequency was calculated by the total divided by 32 open days in April and May, while others were divided by 103 open days in 7 months.

The table shows that the number of graded readers is the lowest among four categories. However, the times students borrow them is the highest.

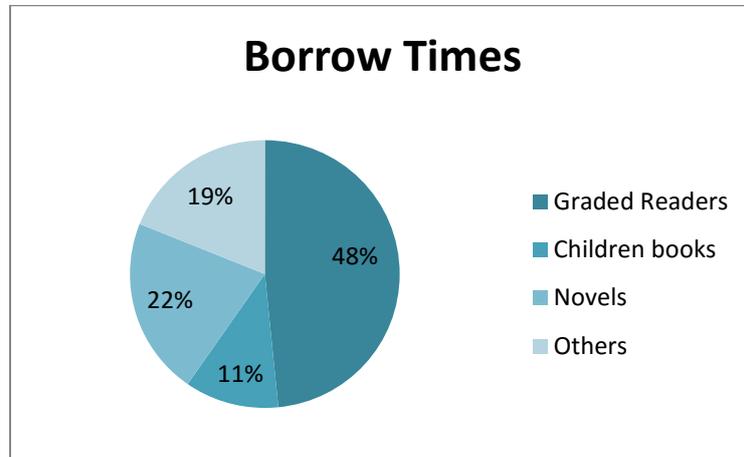


Chart 2: Borrow Times in Total

Additionally, as can be seen from the table and the chart, approximately 50% of all times that students borrow from the library are Graded Readers. Its borrow frequency of 2.03 times per day is also the highest in comparison with other categories.

Novels, despite being the highest number of books among the categories, only account for 22% in the total borrow times with a borrow frequency of 0.9 times per day.

Others (brochures, magazines, etc.), being the second lowest in number, account for 19% of total borrow times with a frequency of 0.8 times per day, having the lowest frequency of all.

Children's books only have the lowest percentage (11%) in the total of borrow times. However, its borrow frequency is the second highest (1.53 times per day) among the four categories.

These numbers indicate that Graded Readers are the most frequently borrowed books from the library, which proves the common belief in academics that Graded Readers are students' favorite type of reading materials. It is also likely that adult ESL readers are interested in children's books even though they are not the target of these books. This is probably because children's books are appealing and easy to understand.

*What benefits does the project bring to students and teachers?*

Eight students and four teachers were interviewed. Eight students are those who have borrowed the most times since the library opened. Teachers are those who have borrowed books from the library. The interviews were in English and Vietnamese. Responses in Vietnamese were translated into English by the researcher. Interviews were conducted through Facebook or phone call.

<b>Student</b>	P.T.	H.N.	N.T.	L.T.	C.T.	N.Y.	L.C	V.Y.
<b>Gender</b>	F	F	F	F	F	F	M	F
<b>Year</b>	3	1	2	2	3	1	1	4

Table 3: Participants

In response to the question of what benefits the project bring to students, both teachers and students believe that the project has benefits of an Extensive Reading Program in Renandya & Jacobs (2002). First, it has provided students with interesting reading materials which helped them improve their language learning. In particular, students replied that reading books has helped them improve their vocabulary and language skills. C.T. - a student responded: "I feel like my English has improved, I learn the language, new expressions, vocabulary, word use, and grammar." She also noted that it has helped her improve her reading skills: "When I read, I understand it [the text], I don't need to translate it into Vietnamese to understand." H.N. - another female student who volunteered for the project stated that the project helped her improve her language skills through activities, like communicating with sponsors.

Second, students and teachers agree that the project expands students' knowledge of the world, of cultures, and of books. Most students and teachers replied that reading books in the library helped them widen their knowledge of the world. T.S - a teacher also stated that it could help students increase their knowledge of different cultures. Additionally, a student said that she knew about great English books through the project.

Third, the project was reported to have positively changed students' attitude toward reading. A female student - P.T. responded: "I myself also had a good feeling with [reading] books while I did dislike it before."

Fourth, students could find enjoyment in reading with the project. L.C. - a male student said that reading books helped him relax. V.Y. - another student noted that she liked that the project could provide students with a quiet place to read. N.T - a teacher reported that her students liked materials in the library.

Finally, the project may help develop a reading habit in its volunteers. L.T. - a female student and a volunteer of the project reported that she usually read books when she was on duty in the reading room.

Apart from having benefits of an Extensive Reading programs, the project has brought other benefits to students, particularly students who volunteered to operate the library. P.T. - a volunteer said that she learned to work under pressure. H.N. - another volunteer reported that when working with the team, she gained experience in team work and learned how to develop her ideas. Another volunteer - N.T. said that activities of the project made her "more active and confident."

In terms of benefits for teachers, all teachers agreed that the library is a rich source of authentic materials to them. Some teachers borrowed books to read for pleasure or to immerse themselves in the language; others used them as teaching materials in their class. For example,

two teachers – T.S. and N.T. used magazines as sample in their magazine project class, and the others - T.Y. and T.T. used Graded Readers as a source of stories for students to write dramas in English.

In general, it could be concluded that the project has benefits of an Extensive Reading program to students. It also provides students with an environment to develop their 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and other useful skills for their prospect career. To teachers, the library could serve as a source of authentic materials for teaching, and a source of reading materials for their own purposes.

*What do teachers and students suggest for the project to improve?*

Besides the advantages, the project still has a considerable amount of space for improvement. The most popular suggestions from teachers and students are to buy more books, to have a more spacious reading room, to hold more events and activities, and to have more activities to promote for the project. Additionally, there are also suggestions for the project to have co-operations with other book clubs in the area, to provide support in technology, and to open for a longer time every day.

## **Conclusion**

Even though advantages that Extensive Reading programs are able to bring to ELT are undeniable, the integration of Extensive Reading into the curriculum is limited due to various reasons. This paper introduces an alternative approach to traditional Extensive Reading programs. It has characteristics of an Extensive Reading programs, but it does not attach to any particular English course. It is an independent library of authentic materials which is operated by students like an English club.

Data of the project show that more and more students are borrowing books from the library. The data also indicate that Graded Readers are students' favorite type of books, and that children's books are also attractive to them. Therefore, it may be helpful for similar projects and other Extensive Reading programs to include children's books in their resources.

According to students and teachers, this project has both benefits of an Extensive Reading program and benefits of an English club. It could help students improve their language skills, especially reading and writing; widen their knowledge of the world, help students find enjoyment in reading, develop a positive attitude toward reading, and develop a reading habit. It could also help students learn 21<sup>st</sup> century skills such as team work, management skills, etc. For teachers, the library provides them with authentic materials to support their teaching and personal uses. This project may be a more practical and sustainable approach to promote Extensive Reading in the context of regional universities.

On the other hand, more promotions and activities should be held to increase the benefits of the project. Also, there should be more books and the reading room should be designed to be comfortable and quiet. In addition, the extent of effects that the project has on students still needs further investigation.

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