READING STATIONS: A TRANSITIONAL ACTIVITY
TO EXTENSIVE READING

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Abstract: Extensive Reading (ER) is a method that allows students to read widely and easily in various topics, primarily for pleasure and general understanding. To introduce ER to the current reading curriculum, an experimental, transitional activity called Reading Station was conducted in two Reading 4 classes in English Department of Hue University, in which students were asked to collect and share online English articles with each other during the class time. Questionnaire and focused-group discussion's results based on 7-week practice revealed that students showed great interest in the activity and claimed to see certain impacts of this activity on the improvement of knowledge and skills. The study's positive outcome implies the potential of using similar activities to solve various challenges in traditional Reading classes.

Key words: Extensive reading, reading station, transitional activity

1. Introduction

Today, a typical ESL reading class still revolves around a mandated, assigned reading textbook or single reading texts followed by comprehension questions. The so-called reading classes involve very little reading (Stoller, 2015) as students spend most of their time analyzing and memorizing key grammatical structures and difficult vocabulary or translating texts from L2 to students' L1. In other settings, the focus may be on answering comprehension questions in different forms, which does not necessarily require the reading of the passage if students only apply reading skills and strategies to achieve their goals.

The drawbacks associated with Intensive Reading (IR) have urged researchers and educators to come up with a more meaningful approach to improve students' reading skill using Extensive Reading (ER) which allows students to read easy and interesting materials in the target language to improve reading speed and fluency. The vast benefits of Extensive reading have been confirmed through ample research of Day and Bamford (1998), Waring (2006) and many others. Students are exposed to the target language in the real context, thus understand how the language is used among natives as compared to commercial textbooks. Besides, easy materials help students read with ease, hence developing higher interest in the activity.

However, several factors including high cost of library investment, lack of class time, large class size, and difficulties in supervising and administrating the study process prevent ER to be present in reading curricula worldwide despite the significant benefits it offers. It poses similar challenge to both teachers and students alike in adapting to ER should a program of this kind penetrate the traditional reading curriculum (Macalister, 2010). The introduction of ER in ESL classrooms, therefore, should be re-examined, and there comes the need for a transitional ER activity for both teachers and students to take the advantage of it while relieving many other pressures associated with this new approach.

This study aims at evaluating Reading Station, a lead-in, transitional activity that allows teachers and students to become habituated with a more ER-inclined study environment. It also seeks to investigate students' feedback of how Reading Station impacts on their knowledge, skill, and motivation.

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Accordingly, three research questions include:

1. What are the results of experimenting Reading Station?

2. What are the students' attitude towards Reading Station?

3. How do students evaluate the impacts of Reading Station on their knowledge, skill, and motivation?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Extensive reading - opportunities and challenges

ER refers to reading ample comprehensible input provided to students to read extensively beyond the set readings assigned for the reading class. By reading widely and easily primarily for information and pleasure, students develop their interest and motivation, thus gradually adopt the habit of reading more (Grabe & Stoller, 2002, Pigada & Schmitt, 2006).

So far, using graded readers to introduce and apply ER in ESL classrooms has been the most common way observed in both ESL classrooms and in studies. Graded readers, written in simplified language and limited vocabulary, enable learners to read without encountering a large number of unknown words, and thus learners are able to read successfully and get pleasure from their reading. Several studies used graded readers as the main treatment to investigate the impact of ER to students' reading improvement and acknowledge the benefits of using them as a means to improve reading comprehension (Bell, 2001; Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Suk, 2017), reading speed (Bell, 2001; Suk, 2017), vocabulary development (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Suk, 2017), and positive attitudes towards second language learning (Liem, 2005).

However, although teachers hold strong belief in the learning benefits of ER, this method has not been widely applied in reading programs. Renandya (2007) for example, believed that the benefits of ER could not outweigh the challenges for teachers to incorporate it as a core feature of their teaching. The application of ER remains a choice, a recommended, extra-curricular activity (Macalister, 2010) conducted outside of classroom reading time, rather than a compulsory component. Especially in higher education contexts, the application of ER remains particularly rare. The fear of incorporating reading time into the course syllabus was shared by many language teachers (Hermann, 2003) since 'a class of students reading silently is not perceived as a class learning, let alone being taught, both by the students themselves and the school administration' (Prowse, 2002). Leaving the students alone to read books outside of class programs is another threat as perceived by teachers because 'without incorporating extensive reading as part of a class programme, the students might not read English books on their own' (Asraf & Admad, 2003). Besides, some other prominent problems associated with using graded readers for ER can be identified, including but not limited to the lack of graded readers or ER resources, the pressure of time for training IR skills for tests and exams, students' low motivation when asked to adopt a new habit such as reading a foreign language material at length. Also, the large size of many ESL classes in developing countries (mostly over 30 students) may discourage teachers to supervise and guide students' reading habits with books during a long period of time.

2.2. The principles of Extensive Reading application

To diversify the options of employing Extensive reading activities, Day and Bamford (2002) listed top ten principles as the basic ingredients of an Extensive Reading activity and encouraged teachers to use them as a means to devise Extensive Reading activities.

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

These criteria grant teachers more freedom to be creative and incorporate various options of Extensive Reading activities without heavy reliance on graded readers as the sole source of ER input material.

2.3. The need for a transitional activity

Most research to date has studied Extensive Reading in total separation to the current dynamic of a reading class. This involves bringing in a completely new Extensive Reading program to assess its impact on students over a chosen period of time using graded readers, and temporarily halt or abandon regular class routines. Little research focuses on the incorporation of ER in the classroom while maintaining the current dynamic of a reading class.

This gap of research paves the way for a transitional ER activity that should not abruptly disrupt the traditional way of learning and teaching reading skills but should gradually familiarize students with a new habit of reading extensively. Besides enjoyment and pleasure from reading activity, students' needs and wants of learning about test taking skills can still be guaranteed. This transition and improvement in the organization of a reading class, therefore, should be investigated and evaluated with the experimentation of such an introductory and transitional activity.

3. Methodology

3.1. The application of ER through Reading Station

3.1.1. Research subject and scope

The study focused on second-year English-majored students of the English Department in two Reading 4 classes. In a total 30-period semester over 15 weeks, students reserve 7 weeks (14 periods) to practice Reading extensively through Reading Station and fulfill all the requirements relating to this activity.

3.1.2. Building and organizing student-generated Reading Stations

An in-class ER activity called Reading Station (Reading Station) was devised to apply in these two reading classes according to the ten principles set by Day and Bamford (2002). In Reading station, students are supposed to bring to class at least two online English articles they found both interesting and easy to read in any topics. These articles should always have titles to catch attention from readers and should not exceed two pages. During the class time, collected readings will be divided into 3-4 reading stations where students come and find any article that suits their taste and level of proficiency, then read for knowledge or

leisure. After reading, students can draw an emoticon or hashtag on the top of each article to express their reaction (like, dislike, love, funny, surprising, etc.) to the content or difficulty level of the article.

Following the top ten principles of using ER in classroom (Day & Bamford, 2002), Reading Station is an ER activity. These principles include:

The reading material is easy

Reading Station made use of the large number of students when students selected their own comprehensible reading texts online. The student group who had the same level of reading proficiency would choose the same grade of difficulty for the chosen articles, so the larger the class, the more diversity in the level of reading difficulty. Students of any level could always find some articles that suited their reading level.

A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available

The large class size brought about another advantage when students could generate almost unlimited number of topics online for their Reading Station of any day. The articles' topics ranged from everyday news to business, entertainment, law, history, education, health, technology, short stories, culture, fashion, to sport and cinema. Also, with at least two articles per students and the articles being exchanged between the two reading classes in the present study, the total number of articles added up to 120 articles per day for each class of roughly 30 students.

Learners choose what they want to read

Students stood up from their daily seats and moved around to different stations and picked the articles they like. Students normally decided their choice based on the article's general topic, catchy title, length, overall intuition of the article's readability and difficulty, and previous readers' reaction to the articles. Students are advised to immediately change the article they were reading if they found it boring or incomprehensible.

Learners read as much as possible

There was no limit to the number of articles students could read during a class time. With an average length of 500-700 words per article, it is evident that the total number of words students could read over a Reading Station class time well exceeded that from a typical short text in traditional reading classroom, which typically covered roughly less than 700 words.

The purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding

Students picked their own favorite articles to read for pleasure, information, and general understanding. No comprehension questions followed, but students were asked to reflect on the most impressive articles they have read during the Reading Station in their reflective diaries.

Reading is its own reward

Students could have the opportunities to read about various fields as the reading collections covered different topics. Reading was its own reward because students were not "learning to read" anymore; they were "reading to learn" about the world and topics that interested them.

Reading speed is usually faster rather than slower

The text's suitable difficulty also helped students become more fluent readers.

Reading is individual and silent

Students went around the classroom and moved to different stations to pick their favorite articles. After that, they could sit or stand to read individually and silently.

Teachers orient and guide their students

At the beginning of every Reading Station, I collected all articles for that day, mixed them with more than 60 articles from the other reading class, and started to brief the class about "amazing headlines" from the articles. This pre-reading activity excited the whole class as students know what sounds interesting to them first just through the articles' titles. Some most favorite titles collected so far include *"Coffee makes you live longer", "Do dogs dream?" "Dolphin language may have grammar" "Sad movies help reduce pain" "Why humans have different nose shape?".*

During Reading Station, I also went around the classroom and participated with students. I discussed with a student about what he or she found interesting about the articles.

The teacher is a role model of a reader

I personally participated in the Reading Station and discussed with students if they wanted to talk. This was also a way for teachers to develop their knowledge in various fields while demonstrating the image of an avid reader to students.

3.1.3. Outcome requirements for reading station

After each Reading Station, students were asked to write individual reflective diaries showing what they thought about the articles they had read by summarizing and reflecting on them. Besides, students could express their feelings when they participate in Reading Station: whether they made a progress, what they needed to improve and suggested a plan to improve these weaknesses. These diaries were collected to assess students' participation and their feedback on this activity.

3.2. Questionnaire and focused-group discussion

A questionnaire was used to investigate students' level of participation in the activity, their feedback on Reading Station, and their own evaluation of Reading Station' impact on their knowledge, skill, and motivation towards Reading. 62 fully-completed responses were collected and analyzed using SPSS 20.0.

Besides, focused-group discussion was also employed for 12 students to explore further the unknown aspects of Extensive Reading's impact on knowledge, skill, and motivation of learners.

4. Results

4.1. Subjects' characteristics

Most student participants in the study were female (90.32%). Students categorized by Grade Point Average (GPA) also varied (Table 1)

Table 1. Grade point average of participants (GPA) (n=62)

Level	Total	Percentage
Average	16	25.81
Fairly Good	30	48.39
Excellent	16	25.81
Total	62	100

Table 1 shows that most participants belong to Fairly Good group, accounting for 48.39% while 25.81% were students in both Average and Excellent group.

4.2. Students' participation and attitude towards Reading Station

4.2.1. Students' participation level

The number of articles taken to class, the average number of articles read per period, and the selected article lengths are the indicators reflecting the student's participation in the Reading Station reading activity (Table 2). The results show that most students brought an average of 1-3 articles to class in each Reading Station reading session. The most striking difference among the GPA student groups was that nearly 19% of the GPA-average group of students brought five or more articles to class, while only 3.33% from the GPA- fairly good group and none from the GPA-excellent group did so.

Table 2. Students' participation level based on GPA (n=62)

Characteristic	Average	Fairly good	Excellent	Overall
Number of articles brought to class				
1-3 article(s)	81.25	93.33	100	91.94
3-5 articles	0.00	3.33	0.00	1.61
>5 articles	18.75	3.33	0.00	6.45
Number of articles read in class				
1-3 article (s)	6.25	20.00	31.25	19.35
3-5 articles	62.50	63.33	50.00	59.68
5-7 articles	31.25	13.33	6.25	16.13
7-10 articles	0.00	0.00	12.50	3.23
>10 articles	0.00	3.33	0.00	1.61
Average length of articles read by students				
1-2 page (s)	56.25	30.00	37.50	38.71
>2 pages	43.75	70.00	62.50	61.29
Submitted reflective diaries				100

The results also show that while most students brought only 1-3 articles to the classroom to build the reading stations, they read twice that number during a fixed period of time in the classroom. Fairly good and excellent students often read more articles in each Reading Station, with 20% fairly good students reading from 5-7 articles, and 12.5% excellent students reading from 7-10 articles per period.

The average length of the articles shows that students at different levels tend to choose different article's lengths. Fairly good and excellent students often choose to read articles longer than two pages, while average students often read shorter articles (from 1-2 pages).

100% of students submitted their reflective diaries with all the requirements set by the teacher. This result reflects serious participation of learners in this Reading Station activity.

4.2.2. General attitude of learners towards Reading Station

Learners' attitude can be explored through their participation and careful attention to teacher's requirements in reading selection, weekly submission of reflective diaries, and so on. Focused-group discussion and questionnaire results both reveal a positive attitude towards Reading Station. Further details can be found in Figure 1.
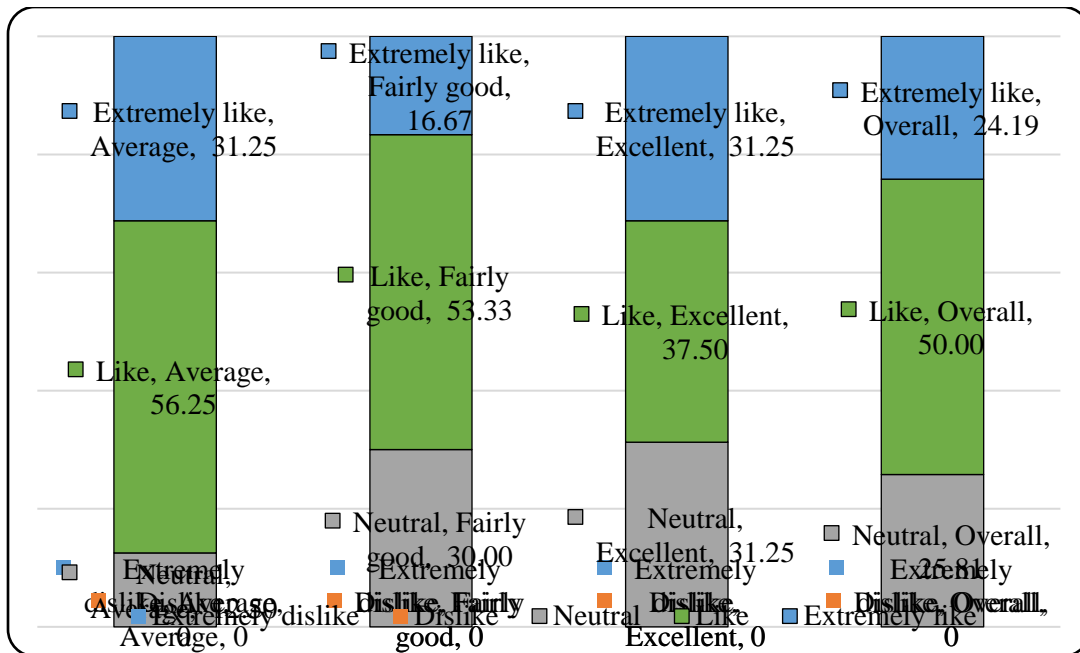
Figure 1. General attitudes towards reading station (n=62)

The result of Figure 1 reveals that over 74% students "liked" or "extremely liked" Reading Station, and no students chose "dislike" nor "extremely dislike". Of these students, 87% of averaged GPA, 70% fairly-good, and 70% excellent responded with highest interest and motivation.

Focused-group discussion also revealed interesting themes mentioned by the students:

Students reported that they had never had any similar reading activity like Reading Station before.

Example 1: *"…This is the first time I have participated in a strange activity when we are not required to sit and read a boring reading practice…"* (Student N.T.M.N - Reading class Group 9)

Example 2: *"…All of my previous reading classes only focus on doing practice test, which is very boring sometimes. Thanks to Ms. Quynh, we were introduced to a new method called Reading Station. I was very excited to try it for the first time…"* (Student N.T.T - Reading class Group 10)

Besides, students liked the moderate length of the articles

Example 3: *"The articles are not so long for me to follow so I felt less nervous. I want to read more in different topics than read something too long. I often get boring easily"* (Student N.H.T.H - Reading class Group 9)

Students also enjoy the fact that there were diverse topics for them to freely choose what to read.

Example 4: *"There were so many topics to choose. I wish I have more time to read more articles! I like it when I can stand up and choose my favorite reading to read"* (Student H.P.Q – Reading class Group 10)

Other appealing characteristics include their free choice to read the articles that suit their current English level and read for pleasure without answering comprehension questions.

Example 5: *"What a relief we are not required to answer any questions at the end"* (Student T.H.B.T – Reading class Group 9)

Example 6: *"I really like it when we can choose what we like to read. It's not like we all have to read boring texts in other reading classes."* (Student H.V.P – Reading class Group 9)

However, one interesting finding was that when asked if students wished to employ Reading Station over the whole semester and completely abandon traditional IR comprehension question-based readings, 56.45% students rejected the idea. Nearly 84% insisted that ER activities should work alongside with traditional IR reading.

Table 3. Students' views of Extensive Reading and Intensive Reading activities (n=62)

Statement	Level of agreement				
	(1: totally disagree ----> 5 totally agree)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Extensive Reading should be included along with regular reading-question-answer activities	0.00	1.61	14.52	33.87	50.00
Comprehension question-based readings should be completely abolished to fully employ Extensive Reading	22.58	33.87	29.03	11.29	3.23
Extensive Reading is more suitable to your interest and level of proficiency than regular reading-question-answer activities	1.61	3.23	35.48	40.32	19.35

4.3. Learners' feedback on Reading Station's impact

Focused-group discussion and questionnaire results show that most feedback for Reading Station was positive, particularly on improving skills such as: Vocabulary, skimming and scanning, and writing.

4.3.1. Improving vocabulary

Research results show that students rated Reading Station activity as a positive way to improve their vocabulary. Nearly 70% of the students surveyed agreed and fully agreed with the components of the vocabulary improvement (Figure 2). In particular, the impacts on vocabulary improvement include: helping students understand and recognize new vocabulary; help to use new vocabulary; develop vocabulary prediction skills through context and recall forgotten words.
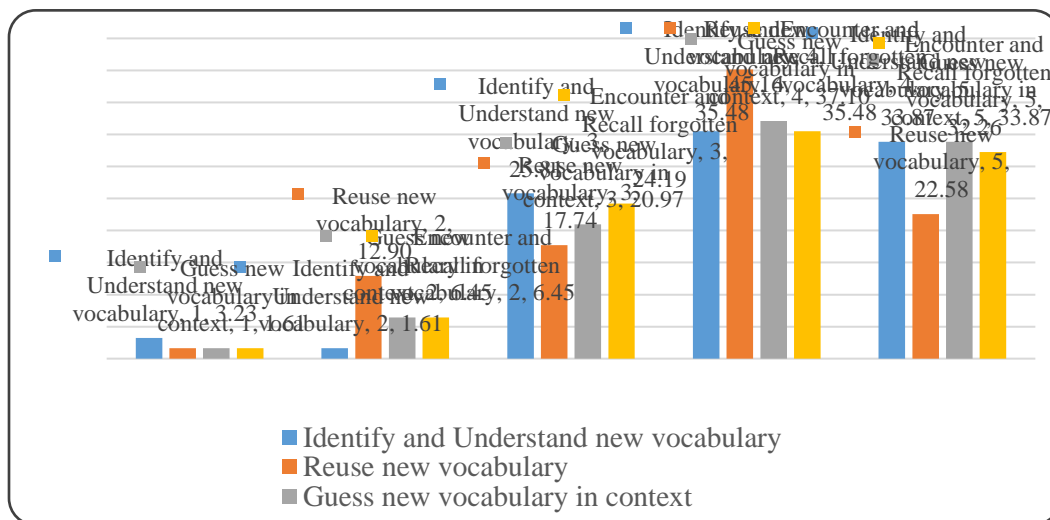

Figure 2. Reading Station's impacts on improving vocabulary (n=62)

The results of the study also show that there were still opinions that Reading Station did not have much impact on the ability to improve the vocabulary of learners on certain aspects such as reusing new vocabulary. However, the percentage of these comments was relatively low, most of which were below 10%.

4.3.2. Improving reading techniques

The study's results reveal that the majority of students highly evaluate Reading Station in improving their Skimming skill rather than Scanning, at 27.42% compared to 8.79% respectively.

In addition, many argue that Reading Station helped them improve their reading speed considerably thanks to the ability to select familiar topics or topics of high interest. This result is consistent with the comments made in the focused-group discussion.
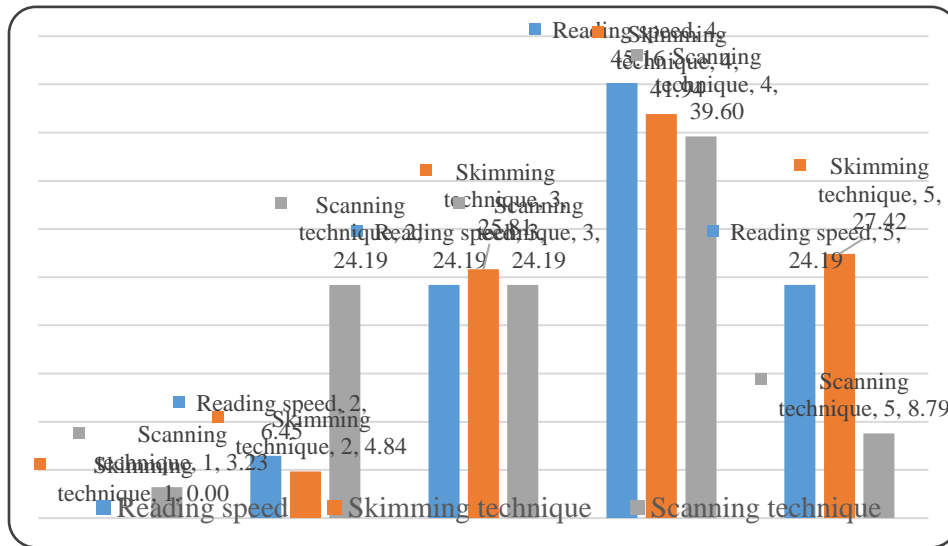

Figure 3. Reading Station's impacts on improving reading techniques (n=62)

4.3.3. Improving writing skill

Reading Station also seemed to have a positive impact on student's writing skills, as revealed by the result of group discussions and questionnaire. In particular, most of the comments were at level 4 and level 5 (the level of impact). The results are shown in Figure 4.
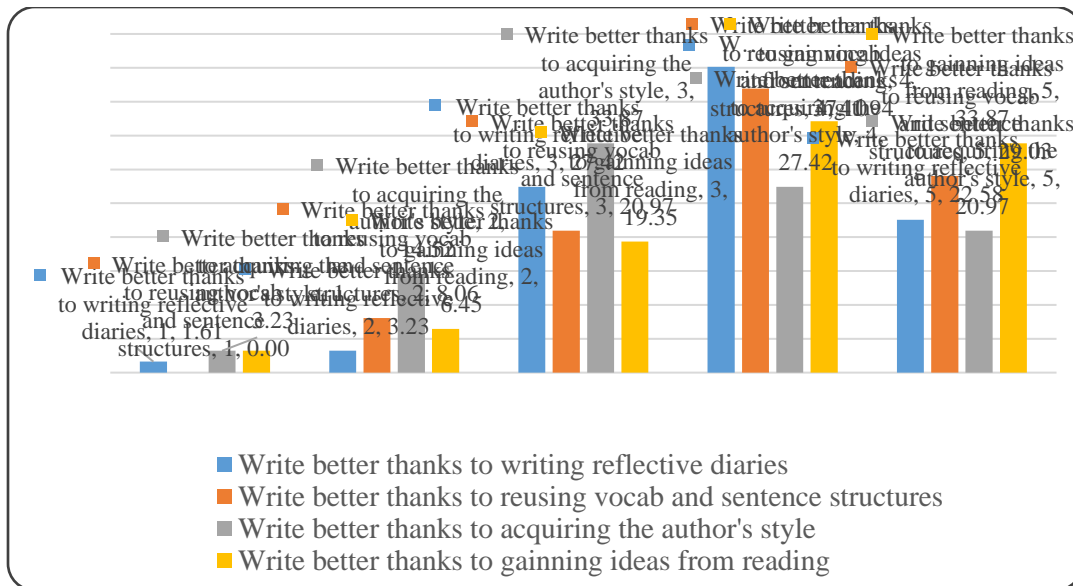
Figure 4. Reading Station's impacts on improving writing skill (n=62)

Legend:
- Write better thanks to writing reflective diaries
- Write better thanks to reusing vocab and sentence structures
- Write better thanks to acquiring the author's style
- Write better thanks to gainning ideas from reading

Among the impacts evaluated, writing reflective diaries, reusing some vocabulary and sentence patterns from the collected readings, and adopting ideas from the readings' authors were the major opinions mentioned not only in the focused-group discussions but were also relatively high rated in the questionnaire, averaging 65% of responses from level 4 (agree) and above (totally agree). However, only 48% students think that Reading Station helps them acquire the writer's style of writing, and up to 15% disagree with this statement.

5. Discussion and suggestions

From the results of the study, it can be seen that Reading Station has pushed students to read more and enjoy reading. This result is consistent with Krashen's (1993) study where the author believed that free voluntary reading (FVR) is the key to developing reading, language abilities, vocabulary, spelling, and writing skills. Also, the fascinating headlines of the articles are the ones that impressed students, offering them quick glance through the main content of the article before going in to read more, thereby increasing the interest in reading. Increasing motivation is also the ultimate goal when incorporating Reading Station in the reading class.

Students' attitude towards Reading Station activity is in line with several findings by research to date. As Reading Station is essentially an ER activity, students' attitude towards it reflects their responses towards ER. Generally, ER attracts students by its novelty, which makes it stand out from regular comprehension activities with end-of-passage questions. Students' motivation was also mainly boosted from the fact that they could choose a suitable topic and difficulty level to meet their interest and proficiency, which is essentially similar to the reasons why ER is favored in other studies.

However, an advantage of Reading Station over other ER applications in previous studies is that the moderate length of online articles and the up-to-date topics were regularly mentioned as the reasons why students like this activity. This can be explained by the fact that while previous studies mainly focused on using graded readers, the information students read was mainly fiction, so little update news was present in this kind of reading material. Meanwhile, online articles helped students stay informed of current events within a moderate number of words, thus boost their motivation to read and explore further.

With regards to improving vocabulary, the present study found out that students claimed they saw clear improvement in various aspects of vocabulary development. Studies by Pigada and Schmitt (2006) and Nation and Ming-Tzu (1999) also suggest that the ER really helps learners understand the meaning and grammatical aspects of the word, thereby raising the awareness to use better vocabulary in Writing. Another study by Yamashita (2008) also found that students after being exposed to ER could use vocabulary and structure that often appear in the reading materials. In the present study, these findings were confirmed as nearly 70% of students think that the ER helps to expand the receptive and productive vocabulary.

Meanwhile, nearly 13% of respondents still claimed that Reading Station did not have much impact on learners' ability to use the acquired vocabulary in productive skills, and this can be explained by Huckin and Coady (1999)'s study. They argued that the benefits of improving vocabulary by ER were not so significant because learning vocabulary by this way was not intentional, so learners can hardly remember new words for a long time. This will prevent students from reusing the vocabulary found in the readings, because by the time they write, the learner will no longer remember to use unintentionally learned words.

Regarding the development of reading techniques, the practice of Reading Station was claimed to improve Skimming more than Scanning. This can be explained by the fact that the main purpose of ER is to read for joy and general understanding, without focusing on locating specific information for a comprehension-detail question. This result corresponds to Sun's (2003) study when he only explored the Skimming for Gist process in detail in a similar activity called Extensive Reading Online (ERO) and barely mentioned the Scanning technique. According to Sun (2003), students entered the reading phases by skimming the titles and subtitles, the topic sentences of each section to try to understand the main content of the article. These steps were also employed by students in the present study when all students approached an article by reading its catchy title first.

Finally, for the improvement of writing skills, the results are consistent with those of Macalister (2010), Soliman (2012) who suggested that students write better by applying some words and sentence structures gained from reading. Reading these up-to-date articles also helps them learn better ideas for later writing activities.

From the results and discussions above, the incorporation of ER using online English articles to current IR-based English reading classes is well suited to the practical context and solidifies the theoretical framework of ER and its benefits. Extensive reading in general and similar activities to Reading Station should complement traditional reading strategies in classroom instruction to stimulate students' interest in reading English and promote positive values of both methods. This is also a case study with initial positive results of how ER can be easily introduced in traditional IR classrooms at low cost, solving several problems and conflicts of integrating ER into the rigid reading curriculum.

Despite employing a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methodology, a few limitations of the present study are worth pointing out. One limitation is that this study involves only initial evaluation of the transitional activity Reading Station, thus, is still on a small scale. Another is that it also sought to explore only students' motivations and feedback without empirical evidence of their sub-skill improvement. Also, the study only looked at English-majored students and thus, could be of little implication to general English learners. Further research may investigate in-depth the impact of such introductory ER activity to students and/or compare the impacts of this transitional activity to complete ER program on a specific skill or part of knowledge. Reading Station activity can be further upgraded to an online version where information is stored over time, creating a bank of graded articles that can be used for later years.

6. Conclusion

Reading Station activity in two Reading 4 classes at Hue University concluded with a positive outcome with regards to students' motivation in reading extensively, and the perceived impacts on improving vocabulary, reading techniques, and writing skill. This activity proved to be a cost-efficient introduction to ER when certain restrictions that prevent the application of ER in reading classes were present. By abiding by the ten core principles of ER, teachers would be able to devise many other similar activities to Reading Station in the present study that suit the available teaching and learning conditions – an activity that balance students' needs and wants.

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TRẠM ĐỌC - MỘT HOẠT ĐỘNG CHUYỂN TIẾP TRONG ĐỌC MỞ RỘNG TIẾNG ANH

Tóm tắt: Đọc mở rộng (ĐMR) là phương pháp cho phép sinh viên đọc nhiều chủ đề khác nhau một cách dễ dàng vì niềm vui và hiểu biết chung. Để từng bước đưa ĐMR vào chương trình học đọc chính khóa, một hoạt động mang tính thử nghiệm và chuyển tiếp có tên Reading Station (RS) đã được tiến hành trong 2 lớp đọc 4 tại khoa tiếng Anh, Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đạo học Huế. Ở đó sinh viên được yêu cầu mang các bài báo tiếng Anh đến lớp để chia sẻ và cùng đọc. Các kết quả thu thập được từ bảng hỏi và thảo luận nhóm người học cho thấy, sinh viên rất thích hoạt động này và đã chỉ ra những tác động tích cực của RS đến kiến thức và kỹ năng của họ. Kết quả này cho thấy tiềm năng ứng dụng các hoạt động tương tự trong dạy đọc tiếng Anh hiện nay.
Từ khóa: Đọc mở rộng, trạm đọc, hoạt động chuyển tiếp