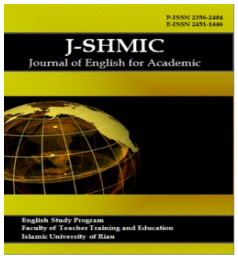

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Supporting Extensive Reading with ChatGPT: A Qualitative Study of Student Experiences in an EFL Context

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the integration of ChatGPT in enhancing the success of Extensive Reading program within the context of English as a Foreign Language. A group of students (n=38) participated in the study and three books of fantasy genre were provided as reading materials. ChatGPT was introduced to assist the participants in their reading comprehension. Data were collected through semi-structured interviewed and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that initial reading interest remains a key factor in deciding ER success. However, integration of ChatGPT provided supports in reducing linguistic and interaction barriers. As a cognitive support, it helps the participants accessing reading materials aligned with their interest and reading level. As an affective support, it facilitates discussion when human interaction is limited or inducing anxiety. This study discusses the potential of implementing ChatGPT in Extensive Reading to complement teacher's roles without diminishing them, especially in English as a Foreign Language context.

KEYWORDS
Extensive Reading, ChatGPT, Teacher Roles, EFL Learners

ABSTRAK

Penelitian kualitatif ini mengkaji pemanfaatan ChatGPT dalam meningkatkan keberhasilan program Extensive Reading dalam konteks pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing. Sebanyak 38 mahasiswa berpartisipasi dalam penelitian ini, dan tiga buku dengan genre fantasi digunakan sebagai bahan bacaan. ChatGPT digunakan untuk membantu peserta dalam memahami bacaan mereka. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis secara tematik. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa minat awal terhadap membaca merupakan faktor utama dalam menentukan keberhasilan program Extensive Reading. Namun demikian, pemanfaatan ChatGPT memberikan dukungan untuk mengurangi tantangan linguistik dan interaksional. Dalam dukungan kognitif, ChatGPT membantu peserta mengakses bahan bacaan yang sesuai dengan minat dan tingkat kemampuan membaca mereka. Dalam dukungan afektif, ChatGPT memfasilitasi diskusi ketika interaksi manusia terbatas frekuensinya atau menimbulkan kecemasan

KATA KUNCI
Extensive Reading, ChatGPT, Peran Guru, Pelajar

pada peserta. Penelitian ini membahas potensi penerapan ChatGPT dalam program Extensive Reading untuk mendukung peran guru, khususnya dalam konteks pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing.

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INTRODUCTION

Extensive Reading (ER), which also goes with the term "pleasure reading", has been widely implemented to facilitate second language acquisition. At its core, ER argues that language acquisition occurs when students, or in this case readers, are provided with a large selection of comprehensible reading materials that they can choose to start, switch, or stop reading based on their preferences (Day & Bamford, 2002; Hidayati et al., 2022; Zhou, 2025). In the context of English language learning, previous studies have demonstrated multiple benefits of ER to facilitate learning, including increased reading motivation (Permatasari & Wienanda, 2023; Rahmawati & Herdawan, 2022), increased vocabulary mastery (Liu & Zhang, 2018; Senoo & Yonemoto, 2014), and importantly reading proficiency (De Lozier, 2019; Muchtar, 2019).

Despite its multiple proven benefits, implementing ER programs has presented numerous significant challenges. The lack of available reading materials, the students' lack of motivation to read, and the teachers' lack of knowledge and experience regarding how to run ER programs (Renandya et al., 2021; Savitri et al., 2024) are the biggest challenges in setting up ER programs in general. Additionally, implementing ER programs in educational settings faces yet some other challenges such as time constraints (Fitriasti et al., 2024) and lack of support from the institution (Wulyani et al., 2022). These studies have identified the challenges of implementing ER on structural and motivational aspects. However, limited attention has been paid to how current advancement in technology might address the existing challenge of learner-level mismatches in ER programs. It underlines the fact that ER programs need to align learners' proficiency with reading materials. Consequently, dedicated and knowledgeable teachers are really necessary to spearhead ER programs in schools and other educational institutions.

Even when ER programs are implemented, teachers still face concerns that students taking part in the program may think that ER is a waste of time (even after they complete the program) or may drop out of the program entirely before completing it. Therefore, it can be argued that the ultimate indicator of ER success is the students' willingness to continue reading beyond the program completion. It is argued that students are more likely to be willing to continue reading when they find their "home run book" (Trelease, 2013). This term refers to the book that they find interesting, easy to read, and connected to them personally; thereby triggering their lifelong interest in reading. Supporting students in finding such book thus becomes an important responsibility for teachers.

The likelihood of finding the "home run book" can be considered as a combination of ***effort*** and ***chance***. Providing the students with a large quantity of books and guiding them through the program constitutes the ***effort*** aspect. Initially, this posed as the biggest problem as hard-copy reading materials are hard to get and distribute. More recently, digital platforms providing soft-copy reading materials have emerged, such as *Xreading* (https://www.xreading.com/), *ER-Central* (https://www.er-central.com/), and *Let's Read* (https://www.letsreadasia.org/). These websites provide a large variety of reading materials, solve book sharing problem, and keep students' reading progress. These available features significantly improve accessibility of reading materials, but their structure largely relies on fixed graded levels and pre-existing book inventories. Consequently, not all students are successful in finding the suitable book for them among the available options. A previous study pointed out the issue that it is quite common for students to find an interesting book topic, only for them not to be able complete it due to a mismatch between the content and their reading proficiency level (Arai, 2022). The ER principles dictate that students should drop said book and go read the next book until they find the suitable book. This process constitutes the ***chance*** aspect. However, repeated failure to find the suitable book could lead to frustration and decreased motivation. The worst outcome would be students abandoning the ER programs entirely. In this context, despite increasing access to digital ER platforms, limited attention has been paid to how emerging AI tools may be used to dynamically adapt reading materials to individual learners' proficiency levels within ER programs.

The integration of AI within ER can be conceptually interpreted through a few theories. From the perspective of Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), language acquisition is facilitated when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly beyond their current proficiency level (i+1). By using AI to generate adapted text, it may potentially support this perspective and help to tackle the persistent challenge in ER programs, which is providing reading materials within this optimal range while preserving learner interest. From another perspective, the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) claims that intrinsic motivation develops when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Within ER context, learners may perceive greater autonomy through topic selection and AI-assisted reading level. Although the present study does not directly measure linguistic gains or motivational improvement quantitatively, these theoretical perspectives provide a conceptual lens for interpreting students' perceptions of enjoyment, helpfulness, and their intention to sustain reading beyond the program.

In recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools have been increasingly influential in various life aspects, one of the popular ones is ChatGPT. In education, AI tools have been widely used to improve language learning process and subsequently optimize learning results (Brierley & Ross, 2025; Mision, 2025; Renandya, 2025). They offer the ability to take input, research, learn, and provide output for a wide range of topics, ultimately providing valuable assistance for both teachers and students. However, existing studies tend to focus on using AI as a supplementing tool rather than a restructuring tool for language programs. Empirical investigations into the integration of AI within ER frameworks are also limited, especially concerning its potential to dynamically adapt reading materials to match learners' proficiency while preserving their topical interests. Moreover, few studies critically examine how AI-generated texts may align with key ER principles such as easily-accessed reading materials, comprehensible input, learner autonomy, and sustained reading engagement. As an effort to

fill this gap, this study investigated the extent of implementing AI in supporting students in finding suitable reading materials and, ultimately, enhance the sustainability and long-term success of ER programs.

METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative design to investigate students' experiences in ER programs. Specifically, a case study design was used by involving second-year students of Politeknik Maritim Negeri Indonesia during the 2024/2025 academic year. An initial screening questionnaire was administered to 106 students. The questionnaire used two criteria to determine students' inclusion in this study: (1) self-reported reading interest and (2) preferred reading genre. Based on the questionnaire results, 19 students who expressed high interest in reading and selected fantasy as their preferred genre and 19 students who expressed low reading interest but also selected the fantasy genre were purposively selected as the participants (n = 38) of this study.

In the present study, text suitability was operationalized based on learners' self-perceived comprehension and comfort level, consistent with core ER principles emphasizing self-selection and individualized pacing. Therefore, AI-assisted adaptation in this study functioned as a learner-controlled mechanism for adjusting text difficulty rather than as a validated proficiency-matching system. Although this study did not independently verify the linguistic accuracy of AI-generated text adaptations, prior research has demonstrated that ChatGPT can produce simplified and pedagogically acceptable text versions suitable for language learners (Mision, 2025). Therefore, in this context, AI output was treated as a credible support mechanism rather than a system requiring formal validation within the present design.

Three popular book series of fantasy genres (Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, Sword Art Online) in soft-copy format were provided for the students to read. Although these book series are widely recognized as linguistically demanding in their original form, they were intentionally provided without modification to preserve narrative authenticity and learner interest. Rather than pre-calibrating text difficulty based on standardized readability measures, the study relied on learner-controlled AI-assisted adaptation to adjust difficulty. This allowed self-selection and individualized pacing, as previously mentioned, which are core ER principles. Three lecturers, serving as reading instructors, took charge of each book title, respectively. The 38 students were asked to start reading without being directed as to which book that they should read. Meanwhile, the instructors also read the book, provided guidance for students when needed, and monitored overall reading activities.

Reading sessions were scheduled twice a week for 90 minutes per session. In total, there were 24 sessions. During the first session, the students were introduced to the concept of ER, its principles, and its benefits. It was also explicitly stated that the program would not directly affect their academic scores. Furthermore, they were also introduced to ChatGPT and trained on how to use it responsibly in relation to the program, particularly formulating prompts to increase or decrease the difficulty level of a text. Then, they were asked to pick one book from the available three main titles for them to read. By this point, their search for the "home run book" had officially started.

During reading sessions, students read the selected book by chapter by chapter individually. They were allowed to use either a phone or a laptop. When they encountered too

many difficult words, which hindered their reading comprehension, they were instructed to access ChatGPT to decrease the difficulty to a level they were comfortable with. Conversely, an increase of the difficulty would be done when they thought that the chapter was too easy. The use of ChatGPT was not mandatory and entirely controlled by the students. After reading, students were encouraged to share their progress and discuss what they read with their friends or the instructor who picked the same book title. They were given the alternative to discuss with ChatGPT instead if they chose to do so. Finally, they were offered the opportunity to switch book title if they wanted to. After completing at least six sessions, the students were allowed to drop out of the program entirely.

In the 24th session, semi-structured interviews containing four questions were administered to all 38 students. The questions investigated whether: (1) they enjoyed the program, (2) ChatGPT was helpful, (3) they preferred sharing with ChatGPT, friends, or instructor, (4) they would like to continue reading beyond the program. Although the interview protocol consisted of four guiding questions, each session involved probing and follow-up inquiries to obtain clarification and elaboration from the participants. This flexible structure is consistent with semi-structured interview methodology, allowing depth of exploration while maintaining alignment with the research objectives. The interview sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

The resulting data were coded using an inductive approach and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. Initially, the main instructor/researcher conducted open coding by reviewing transcripts line by line to identify meaningful units related to students' experiences, perceptions of AI use, and reading engagement. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories reflecting recurring patterns across participants. Subsequently, the three instructors independently reviewed a subset of the transcripts and the preliminary coding scheme to ensure analytical credibility. Differences in coding interpretations were discussed collectively until consensus was reached. Through iterative discussion and refinement, the codes were organized into overarching themes that represented shared and contrasting experiences among participants. This collaborative process functioned as investigator triangulation, enhancing the trustworthiness and consistency of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to participation, students were informed about the purpose of the present study, the nature of their involvement, and their right to withdraw at any stage (specifically after the sixth session) without academic consequences. Written informed consent was obtained from all 38 students. To ensure confidentiality, their identities were anonymized during transcription and reporting, and no identifiable personal information was included in the publication.

As this study involved the use of ChatGPT, students were provided with guidance on responsible and ethical use of AI tools, including avoiding plagiarism, protecting personal data, and evaluating AI-generated output. This ER program was explicitly separated from formal academic grading to minimize coercion and ensure voluntary engagement.

FINDING

Program Completion and Students' Enjoyment

The interview results of the first question indicated that out of the 38 students, 24 completed all sessions and the remaining 14 dropped the program after the sixth session. All 14 students belonged to the group that expressed disinterest during the initial screening question. Further questions revealed that they went into the program with doubts about its enjoyment and that their opinions remained unchanged after joining the program.

Participant 21: "*Reading is not my hobby and this program does not change that.*"

In contrast, five students who initially expressed low interest in reading managed to complete the program. These students expressed similar reasoning, with social interaction becoming their motivation to stay in the program.

Participant 23: "*My close friend is here in the program. I like talking to her about anything*".

Perceived Usefulness of ChatGPT in ER

Interview data for the second question revealed that most students thought that ChatGPT was helpful for their reading activities. 22 of the 24 students used ChatGPT to decrease the difficulty level of what they read. Two students did not use it to adjust the difficulty level, explaining that they were already reading at a comfortable level.

Participant 11: "*I am comfortable with the book. I know most words in it*".

In addition, all 24 students reported using ChatGPT to confirm their understanding of the story by asking questions regarding the plot, character motivation, or implicit meanings. This suggests that ChatGPT is not only helping to adjust reading level, but also supporting reading comprehension.

Participant 11: "*I used ChatGPT to ensure that my understanding is correct*".

Interaction Preference during ER Sessions

For the third question, the data showed that from the 24 students completing the program, two of them preferred sharing ideas with ChatGPT only, six preferred their friends and/or the instructor, and the remaining 16 expressed no problem in sharing with any of them. The two students preferring AI-only interaction cited that they are concerned with the others' perception of their language skills.

Participant 17: "*I am not confident with my speaking skill. ChatGPT does not judge my skill*".

In contrast, the six students with human-only preferences reported that discussing with friends about something they share an interest with is what makes reading even more enjoyable.

Participant 05: "*I know the story and they know too. Talking about it is fun*".

Intention to Continue Reading after ER programs

The data from the fourth interview question indicated that all 24 students who completed the program expressed an intention to continue reading the book series they had picked up beyond the program. They also stated that they would keep using ChatGPT to assist them in their future reading activities.

Participant 02: "*I want to read more books which are above my reading level. ChatGPT will help me access them*".

Some students also showed interest in stories in reading format compared to other forms of media adaptation.

Participant 12: "*Reading Harry Potter is more fun than watching it in movies. It is because of ChatGPT that I can do that*".

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Success of ER programs

Completing ER programs does not necessarily mean success. Its success is reflected based on the number of students willing to continue reading even after the program has been completed. There are multiple factors contributing to the success of ER programs. It is worth noting that students' personal interest in reading played a significant role in determining its success (Anandari & Iswandari, 2019; Tanaka, 2017). Students showing great interest in reading are already at the right starting point and this state helps the teacher significantly in running the program. All they need is just a slight push by the instructor, which is done by facilitating them to find their home run book. This is supported by the finding that all 19 students showing interest in the screening question completed the program.

Nevertheless, initial reading interest is not the only contributing factor identified in this study. There are five out of the 19 students with low reading interest who ended up completing the program. Another factor that might contribute to sustained ER activity seems to be social interaction (Kirchhoff, 2015; Puspita et al., 2022). These five students reported that reading with close friends was engaging for them to participate and motivating them to stay, even though the reading activity itself was not initially enjoyable. This suggests that social interaction could serve as a supporting mechanism for those with low reading interest. Previous studies also mentioned a similar benefit by building an ER community (Cremin, 2019; Yasuoka, 2013), which serves as a vessel for social interaction.

The discussion here underlines that finding out students' reading interest might be useful for teachers in setting up ER programs. As students with reading interest might benefit primarily from access to suitable reading materials, more attention and guidance could be allocated to students showing low interest in reading. After all, the objective of ER programs is not merely distinguishing the students based on their reading interest, but rather helping all of them in finding their "home run book", developing a love for reading, and eventually doing ER on their own time.

Roles of Teacher in ER

In ER, teachers may play multiple roles in trying to ensure the success of the program. This study further underlines some key roles they need to assume. Firstly, they need to provide accessible reading materials and guide students in finding their home run book (Anandari & Iswandari, 2019). This does not necessarily refer to the quantity of available reading materials, but rather to their relevance and suitability. Students with low reading interest would not have the drive to read through a lot of reading materials. Therefore, increasing the likelihood of finding engaging and interesting book as their first reading becomes important. By assisting

students in selecting their first book, teacher could increase the chance of finding the home run book on the first attempt.

Another important role played by the teacher is acting as a reading peer (Hadiyanto, 2018; Xiaomei, 2020). The findings here showed that some students preferred interaction or discussion with friends or instructors. As a result, they are more likely to stay in the program. It highlights the importance of social support and shared reading experiences in sustaining their motivation within ER programs. Furthermore, these findings underline that AI assistance does not diminish the existing roles of teachers in ER, rather it complements the existing functional and social roles. In the end, it indicates that teachers should keep exploring various pedagogical alternatives as an effort to raise the success rate of ER programs.

AI-assisted ER programs

Given all the responsibilities of teachers in ER programs, additional supports that reduce the burden may be beneficial. Several studies have shown the usefulness of AI in ER programs (Mision, 2025; Shen et al., 2025; Tahir & Sahtiani Jahrir, 2025). The findings of this study provided additional proofs that AI-assistance, especially ChatGPT, could resolve several of the existing burdens or challenges in ER programs.

Figure 1 presents a framework of how teacher and ChatGPT play complementary roles in supporting students in ER programs, which comprises three interrelated components: teacher support, AI assistance through ChatGPT, and student engagement in ER. Teacher support includes providing access to appropriate reading materials, guiding book selection, and fostering social interaction, whereas AI assistance refers to students' use of ChatGPT to modify perceived text difficulty, confirm comprehension, and engage in discussion when human interaction is limited or psychologically challenging. The intended outcome of this integrated support system is sustained reading engagement, reflected in students' expressed intention to continue reading beyond the formal program.

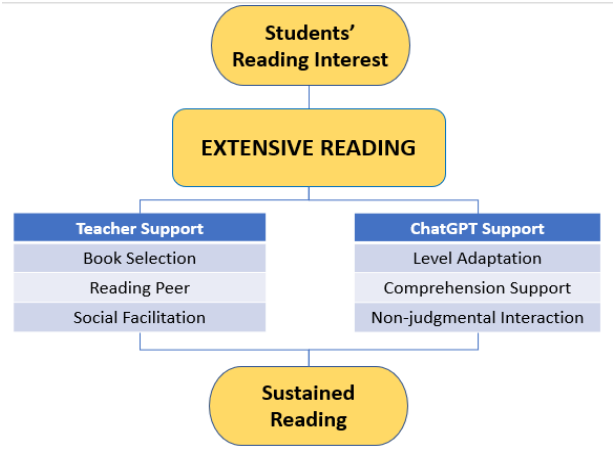

Figure 1. AI-assisted ER Framework

In Indonesian context, English is considered as a foreign language. It means that reading books in English poses a lot of challenges, one of which is language difficulty. Books originally written in English were intended for those with relatively high reading skill.

Adapted versions with easier difficulty level are rarely available, even for popular books. This is where ChatGPT becomes pedagogically relevant. The AI is reported as helpful in tackling this problem as it can adjust the difficulty level of what the students want to read. By picking up a book of interest and adjusting the difficulty level with the help of ChatGPT, students can read the book which otherwise could not be linguistically accessed. This could help increase their participation and engagement in ER.

In addition to linguistic support, ChatGPT could provide assistance in interaction support during ER sessions. When students find a book they like and read it, they may need a help to discuss it with. It could be for confirming their doubts or reflecting on what they read. However, teachers are not always available for such interactions as they have to monitor several students in the program. Having discussion with other fellow readers might become an option. However, this also comes with a different kind of challenge; students are not confident with their speaking skill. This is also an aspect that ChatGPT can help address. It is consistently available whenever the students need it, it is non-judgmental of the students' question, and it provides generally accurate information.

While this study integrates the concept of the "home run book," it does not directly measure whether AI assistance increased the likelihood of finding such a book. Rather, the findings suggest that AI was perceived as facilitating access to books that students were already interested in but found linguistically challenging. Future research may investigate whether AI support influences the discovery process itself.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the integration of AI assistance, specifically ChatGPT, in enhancing the success of ER programs. Although students' interest in reading remains a key factor in determining their success, ChatGPT could provide supports for their engagement in ER. From a theoretical perspective, ChatGPT could function as both cognitive and affective supports in ER; It assists students in accessing comprehensible reading materials and it facilitates interaction by lowering the barriers for discussion. Crucially, these important roles of AI do not replace the roles of human interaction, rather they complement them. These findings reinforce the function of AI as a supporting tool and it does not replace the involvement of teachers in ER programs.

Despite these contributions, the present study acknowledges its several limitations that may need addressing in further studies. First, it has a relatively small number of participants and it involves only one reading genre. A larger number of participants and additional genres would require more teachers to be involved as ER instructors. Second, the participants come from a single institution. Third, the findings rely primarily on self-reported interview data, reflecting students' perceptions rather than objective measures of reading performance or comprehension accuracy. Finally, the absence of a control or comparison group limits the ability to determine how AI-assisted ER differs from traditional ER implementation. Further studies inviting participants from another institution, particularly the ones with different levels of reading proficiency may provide broader insights in implementing AI assistance in ER programs. Moreover, studies employing experimental or quasi-experimental may help clarify the comparative impact of AI integration in different ER contexts.

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