A Phenomenological Exploration of EFL Students' Experiences With Graded Readers

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study investigated EFL students' perception of Graded Readers (GRs) as reading materials based on their extensive reading classroom experience. In-depth interviews were employed as a primary data source. Meanwhile, students' reading log, portfolio, and reflective essay were utilized to supplement the primary data and as data rigor. Four EFL students who had graded books in their reading class were interviewed to obtain the primary data. That number came from total students in the class with Extensive Reading intervention who experienced reading GRs several times. After the data were collected, they were analyzed using a coding process. Then, three main themes were explained in the interview data. First, the students perceived GRs as a beneficial reading material because of the different levels provided, vocabulary repetition, few page numbers, and representative illustration. Second, students considered GRs as an unfamiliar material because of limited resources and limited information. Last, students perceived GRs as less enjoyable due to limited details and few options of the genre. Conclusion and recommendations were also discussed in this report.

Keywords: Graded readers, Extensive reading, leveled books, EFL reading classroom

1. INTRODUCTION

Paying attention to the critical position of reading in EFL contexts, many experts recommend Extensive Reading (ER) as a worth applying approach to teach reading. Day and Bamford (2002), known as founding fathers of the approach, highlighted reading for pleasure as the ER's identical characteristic [1]. To gain the pleasure of reading, Day and Bamford suggested letting the readers decide books they want to read. Thus, books are viewed as an imperative component in ER.

As an instrument to get the pleasure of reading, Day and Bamford (2002), supported by Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF) (2011), recommended Graded Readers (GRs) for ER practices [2]. By providing various English levels, starting from beginners to advances, the books are viewed as the right choices to accommodate students' needs in learning a new language. Students could select books according to their linguistic competence level to understand the books due to the options. When they gain comprehension, the possibilities of getting the students engaged and compelled with the books are getting bigger. The other reason why ERF suggests GRs in the implementation of ER is that the

books are varied in genres and topics that ease students to choose by considering their interests.

Not only the authorized organization of ER, Extensive Reading Foundation or ERF and the founding fathers of the approach, Day and Bamford, but researchers also bring GRs to the spotlight through studies. Salameh (2017) conducted a study on ER to improve students' reading attitude [3]. In the intervention, 70 EFL students in an Arabian university were asked to read GRs for fifteen weeks. Pre and post-treatment, students' attitude toward reading was measured using a 20-item adapted questionnaire. As data analysis, a Pair-Sampled t-test was deployed. The result showed that students' attitude toward reading was improved. The data also reported that the students gave a positive response to the ER program implemented with GRs.

The second study was from Martinez (2017), who employed a mixed-method research design to explain how GRs positively impacted Silent Reading, which the implementation was similar to ER [4]. The study employed multiple data collection techniques by taking four classes consisting of around 25 for each class as respondents. The quantitative data were gathered from a

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vocabulary size test and reading comprehension test conducted before and after the treatment, while qualitative data were gained from interviews, reading logs, and students' journals. As a result, reading GRs resulted in vocabulary improvement, reading comprehension enhancement, and a positive reading attitude.

The third study by Furutaka (2015) focused on other factors that supported the readability of GRs other than language proficiency levels [5]. By interviewing and applying think-aloud protocols to 83 high school and university students, the findings explained that the GRs' headword was not the only concern students needed to consider to reach comprehension. GRs readability factors were the array of target readers' age, cultures, stylistic language features, illustrative pictures, literary devices, and plot organization.

From those studies, one exciting point appeared in the absence of an in-depth exploration of perception about GRs from students as primary consumers. Therefore, this current research investigated students' experiences with GRs in a reading class with an ER approach. Strengthening the investigation's significance, the researcher carried out a preliminary observation in one of Indonesia's private universities. Known from the observation, the popularity of GRs in that university did not shine as bright as that were shown in previous studies. In that context, the ER was implemented to teach students reading skills. The teacher allowed the students to choose what to read for reading assignments. Even though the teacher had introduced, provided, and promoted GRs to the students, 123 freshmen joined the class, only less than 20% of the total selected GRs. Most of them tended to be more interested in authentic books such as novels or short story compilation.

An in-depth exploration of students' experiences of reading GRs was conducted to understand the phenomenon that happened in the aforementioned English department. Thus, this current research intended to explore students' perception of GRs based on their reading class experiences, which implemented the ER. The formulated research question is, "What are students' perceptions about GRs as reading materials based on their experiences?"

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. EFL Reading Materials

Widely known types of reading materials in EFL classrooms are authentic and non-authentic. Tomlinson (2011) defined authentic materials as designed with a real-world context and putting aside the educational goals such as novels, newspapers and magazines while non-authentic are made for teaching and learning such as textbooks [6]. Both authentic and non-authentic can be used as reading sources that provide language input and a tool to practice to enhance students' reading skills. However, which one is way better than learning a new language is still debatable among experts.

Some experts view authentic sources are more recommended than non-authentic ones. Al-Azri and Al-Rashdi (2014) [7], Guo (2012) [8], Hudson and Williams (2015) [9] agreed that authentic materials are more suggested to develop reading abilities since they provide richer types of language models so that the students could get more input than that they use non-authentic materials. Puspitasari added, besides giving linguistic benefits, authentic materials are also advantageous to students' affective aspects [10]. Wilarsih presented that the materials can invite students' curiosity and excitement to be more active in classroom discussions [11].

Regardless of all benefits resulted from utilizing authentic reading materials, ER enthusiasts support non-authentic sources for EFL students. Extensive Reading Foundation suggested ER practitioners use GRs made in various English levels [2]. According to some sources (Holster, Lake & Pellowe, 2017 [12]; McQuillan, 2016 [13]; and Hill, 2013 [14]), the levels aim to accommodate students' different English proficiencies in a way they could select one that contains the suitable frequency of words and simple grammatical structures.

2.2. Graded Readers (GRs) as EFL Reading Materials

The position of GRs in the ER is undeniably stable since experts recommend the books to ER implementation. Day and Bamford (2004) suggested that students employ reading materials that have been decisively written for them at different English ability levels. Maruyama (2009) said that leveled books are purposefully made with semantic and syntactic simplification to develop students' reading skills [15]. Based on the ERF (2011), GRs are controlled in vocabulary, grammar and plot to reduce non-essential words and make useful words appear more often in learning purposes, suitable for ER [2].

Different publishers publish GRs, and each of them has different standards to determine the levels. Commonly, their book leveling standards are defined as the vocabulary used, grammar complexity, plot density, and representative illustration (ERF, 2011) [2]. From those aspects, vocabulary, especially the headwords, are the most frequently used aspect for book leveling (Claridge) [16]. Headword itself is "a word or term placed at the beginning of the dictionary or encyclopedia" (Webster) [17]. For instance, 'assist' as a headword has a family word such as 'assists,' 'assisting,' 'assistance,' and 'assistant.' For the basic level, Oxford Bookworm sets 250 – 700 headwords while McMillan has 300-1400 headwords. For the advanced level, Cambridge has

around 3800 headwords while Oxford University Press have 2500 headwords.

Several researchers believe that using GRs is sufficient to develop fluency and reading ability. Monica (2016) investigated the role of GRs in EFL classrooms, and the result showed, GRs helped the students improve reading ability and fluency [18]. In Malaysia, Ali and Saiden (2015) posited that a graded reader could help students' difficulties in a second language reading since the books were produced with simple word structure [19]. Another evidence showing how useful GRs were to EFL students was done by Albay (2017), in which the finding depicted students' improvement on vocabulary and grammar after reading GRs for a particular time [20]. Through experimental research, Mermelstein (2015) involved 211 students and divided them into a control group with intensive reading and an experimental group with extensive reading and GRs as the primary material [21]. The result proved that the experimental group achieved a more excellent writing score than the control group.

However, some other experts mentioned the weakness of GRs as non-authentic materials. The apparent hole is losing benefits of reading authentic materials such as experiencing direct interaction with the target language 2(Huang, Tindall & Nisbet, 2011 [23]; Al-Azri & Al-Rashdi, 2014 [7]). Besides that, Febrina (2017) said that non-authentic materials do not give examples of how the target language is used in real life [23].

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1. Research Design

This qualitative research employed a phenomenological design. According to Creswell (2014), a phenomenological study focuses on studying individuals with their lived experiences, reading GRs [24]. Detailing the description of a phenomenological study, Eddles-Hirsch (2015) mentioned that this research focuses on comprehensive information about what participants experienced [25]. Those characteristics of phenomenological study met this current research, which tried to explore students' reading GRs.

3.2. Research Participants

This current research participants were four freshmen who enrolled in a reading class with ER in one private university in Indonesia. A primary criterion to select the participants was their extensive experience with GRs. To gain rich data, the participants should have read more than two books of GRs. To find students with that characteristic, the researcher checked the reading log that all students submitted to the teacher at the end of the semester and got six students meeting the criterion. Then

the researcher contacted the participants to ask for their agreement to be interviewed. Only four students agreed to participate in this research, while two others did not answer the researcher's request call. The four male and female participants were addressed using a pseudonymous name as Surya, Arif, Danti, and Flora to protect their real identity for research ethics.

3.3. Research Instruments and Data Collection Techniques

There were two types of data employed to answer the research question collected using different techniques and instruments, primary and secondary data. As primary data, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted using two instruments, interview protocol and cell phone. The protocol was utilized to keep the interview process on track. It consisted of five main questions addressing their perception about EFL reading, attitude towards ER, the process of choosing books, reasons for choosing GRs, and engaging and disengaging moments with GRs. In some situations, the researcher probed the answers given by the participants to get rich data. Besides individual interviews, students' reflective essays, reading portfolios and reading logs were submitted to supplement the primary data.

3.4. Procedures and Data Analysis

The interview procedures were commenced by contacting the candidate to ask for their agreement to participate in this research. After getting the agreement, a meeting appointment was made. The first interview session was encompassed using Indonesian to explain the answer without a language barrier since they used the language daily. Other interview sessions when the researcher needed a further explanation about specific points that the participants addressed in the first interview. Each session needed around twenty to thirty minutes to finish. After that, the interview data were transcribed and member checked. Member checking showed that changes were not needed since the transcription was as what the participants meant. The secondary data consisting of reading log and reading portfolio were submitted before the interview sessions; however, the analysis process was carried out after the interview data were coded. Next, relevant information from the supporting data was highlighted to complete, support, and triangulate the primary data to keep the data immense and trustworthy.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged from the data represented students' perception toward GRs dealt with benefits, unfamiliarity, and books' weaknesses. Some reasons are also presented to rationalize the perception.

4.1. As Beneficial Reading Materials

The students perceived GRs as materials that gave them benefits because they provided different English levels, vocabulary repetition, few pages, and representative illustrations.

4.1.1. Graded Levels

According to the interview data, the students thought levels were a 'selling point' that GRs had. The English levels starting from beginner to advance level created a room for them to select ones that met their linguistic competence. Surya said, "The books are not hard to understand because I choose books that meet my English level." The reading log showed that Surya read two books in levels three and four, and he wrote that he enjoyed reading them. She added, since being able to choose books that the English level was manageable for him, his reading interest was cultivated. Regarding how GRs benefitted the participants, Arif also revealed that through GRs, his intention to monitor his English level was accommodated. On the same side for obtaining a valuable benefit from GRs, Danti said that GRs helped her increase her writing ability. Besides, in terms of plot development, Danti also mentioned that GRS enhanced her grammar ability when writing. "Before reading the books (GRs), I only use simple sentences. After that, I got some models of complex sentences that I could apply in my writing," she said.

Various levels of GRs were also beneficial to reading fluency. Danti said, "I can read fast because I don't find any difficult vocabulary. I don't need dictionary." Echoing Danti's statement, Arif said, "I read starter level quickly. I found no words stopping me. It saves time".

The participants' statements correspond with some experts. Sari (2016) posited that one problem students faced in gaining reading comprehension was a language gap between the materials and their language mastery [26]. As seen in the findings that the gap can be minimized by providing leveled books. That statement is also supported by other experts who mentioned the benefits of GRs. The books increased students' reading interest (Azmuddin, Ali, and Ngah, 2014) [27], positive attitude, reading habit (Guo, 2012) [8], and students' learning autonomy for being able to monitor their reading skill progress (Renandya & Jacobs, 2015) [28]. In relation to language skill enhancement, GRs also gave a significant contribution through students' writing (Mermelstein, 2015) [21], grammar knowledge (Albay, 2017 [20]; Salehi, Asgari, & Amini, 2015 [29]; and Lee, Schallert, & Kim, 2015 [30]), and reading fluency (Hudson & Williams, 2015 [9]; Monica, 2016 [19]).

4.1.2. Vocabulary Repetition

The data showed another aspect that made students more interested in GRs, which is vocabulary repetition. Flora said, "It happened frequently (meeting same new words)," she added. She also told that vocabulary she got contributed to her improvement in her English proficiency score significantly. "In reading (one of the sessions on the test), I found words that I ever met when reading GRs. I think I remember the words because they are shown repeatedly". Surya also had the same opinion as Flora, and he even found words that he already knew before yet rarely used the words to produce a language. "Reading GRs invited some known words that I rarely used productively," he argued. He also posited that because the words appeared several-times, he then remembered the meaning of them.

The interview demonstrates that one of GRs beneficial aspects is vocabulary repetition. Since words appear on repeat, the students start to be familiar with the words, the meaning, and the use of the words in productive skills. The result corresponds with research conducted by Martinez (2017) [4], Ponniah (2011) [31], Hudson and Williams (2015) [9], and Albay (2017) [20].

4.1.2. Few Numbers of Pages

Few numbers of pages become a triggering factor to students' willingness to read GRs. "I could finish it for one day, then I wanted to read more and more," said Arif. Danti had the same thought as Arif. "I feel more confident to read more because the number of pages is not too many so that I could finish the book in a short time."

A terminology of page numbers in books used in this research corresponds with reading volume, a term used by Allington (2014) [32]. Through an empirical study, Allington proved that reading volume significantly affected students' reading fluency and reading achievement.

4.1.3. Representative Illustration

The last item of GRs engages the participants in the illustration. Based on the reading log information, students loved reading books with pictures, which helped them walk through the content. Flora, whoever read GRs at a low level, commented about the illustration and colors. She wished that the colored illustration was also applied not only to books for beginners but also for advanced levels.

The illustration is used to facilitate students' comprehension of the book they read. That statement is in line with Luo and Lin (2017), who highlighted the significance of illustrations in books read by the students [33].

4.2. As Unfamiliar Reading Materials

Despite all benefits that GRs offered to the students, based on the data, the participants also perceived that the materials were not entirely familiar for them, which caused their hesitance to choose GRs. Limited sources and limited information mostly caused Their unfamiliarity.

4.2.1. Limited Sources

One of the reasons why students did not enjoy reading GRs was their limited sources. The books were not available in the typical bookstore. Students only found the books in their department, and they had to line up with other students to get the book since the books' availability in the department library was still limited. Flora said that she rarely could get a GR with a genre that she was fond of from the interview data. That statement was justified by her reading log and reflective essay, which showed her disengagement and disappointment for not finding a GR that she wanted to read and ended up reading one that she did not enjoy.

The participants' condition about the implementation of ER in this research depicts that they lacked graded readers' choices. In effect, they just picked what the department provided in the library. Some of them got ones corresponding to their English level and interest, but others did not, so that they somehow feel demotivated reading the books. There is no other way for the teachers to add more books since the essence of ER was providing students with excellent access to wide varieties of books (ERF, 2011 [2]; Day and Bamford, 2002 [1]).

4.2.2. Limited Information

The other reason students' unfamiliarity with GRs was limited information about book recommendations and tips to choose GRs. Regarding the recommendation, Danti said, "To select an interesting book, I counted much on a book review in some blogs or website. I hate it that I could not do that in reading GRs. I did not know which GRs were captivating."

Besides having a problem finding book recommendation since information about GRs were not available in book websites that Danti often visited, she also addressed her difficulty in defining books that met her language level. It also happened to Arif and Flora. They did not understand how to find the right book based upon the level. Arif said, "I did not know in what level of English I was, so I could not decide which a right GR to read. I randomly chose a graded book at level 5. It is stressful."

Even though experts and teaching practitioners widely know extensive reading, EFL students may not be quite familiar with the approach, including how to choose suitable books for them. ERF (2011) and Day and Bamford (2002) suggested teachers give prior information about how to choose suitable books to avoid the students from the wrong book [2]. Puspitasari (2019) stated that it could hinder their reading motivation when students chose the wrong book [34].

4.3. As less Interesting Reading Materials

From the data, the participants had a less engaging experience with GRs, so that they perceived GRs as less enjoyable materials. That perception was caused by limited description and story details in the books.

Lack of a detailed description of the story triggered the students' dissatisfaction in reading GRs. "The description given does not help me imagine the story. When reading the novel, I could feel that I was there, where the character was, where the conflict happened," said Danti about GRs. Besides Danti, Surya also had the same thought. Surya compared GRs to an Indonesian translated book in the same title. "When reading the graded book of a novel that I have ever read in Indonesian version, I found the plot in GRs was not described in detail."

From the finding above, it could be acknowledged that the students, in some cases, felt unhappy with GRs for having limited descriptions and story details. Claridge (2012) said that GRs are books simplified from original novels, books, or stories. The simplification is by taking the crucial points that significantly contribute to the plot development. Some non-fundamental descriptions may be omitted, as well [16]. That is why the participant found missing parts of the story. Moreover, he had read the original book even though it is an Indonesian translated version. Therefore, some experts and teaching practitioners recommend authentic reading materials such as novels or short stories for EFL classroom (Al-Azri & Al-Rashdi, 2014 [7]]; Guo, 2012 [8]; Hudson & Williams, 2015 [9]; and Puspitasari (2016) [10].

It is also seen from the findings that the students' disappointment was caused by an incomplete description of characters and setting, so that it hindered their engagement. Some researchers, however, suggested follow up activities to get the students engaged such as writing dialogue journals (Paradita, 2018) [35], making book review (Azis & Puspitasari, 2019) [36], and assigning students collaborative writing that involve artwork (Murtiningsih, 2016) [37].

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, based on their experience with GRs, students positively and negatively perceive the books. The positive perception deals with the book's benefits, while the negative perception regards the limited information about the book, lack of sources, and lack of rigid description of the story in GRs. Regardless of all the

book's limitations, GRs are still worth using as reading materials in an EFL classroom due to the books' extensive benefits. However, to minimize the books' negative aspects, the teachers need to provide complete options for the books to have more options to select and detailed information about GRs such as recommended items that the students could choose. To make reading GRs more engaging, the teachers should provide follow-up activities that involved students' creativity.

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