Technology Meets Extensive Reading: Design of a Blended Extensive Reading Program in an English as a Foreign Language Context

Zeynep Yadigar Tosun¹, and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Safiye İpek Kuru Gönen²

¹ Department of Foreign Languages, Eskişehir Technical University, Turkey
² Department of English Language Teaching, Anadolu University, Turkey

Abstract

Extensive reading (ER) is of great value in fostering language competence and nurturing a lifelong enthusiasm for reading in a foreign/second language (L2). The ER research has begun to follow an innovative path to address the evolution of learner profiles in the age of technology transformed into the digital realm. To integrate technology into ER and enhance L2 learners’ reading experiences, this study was designed to provide a systematic ER program integrated with blended learning for tertiary level English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Rooted in the core of ER principles and an EFL context’s features, the program of this study, the blended ER program, aimed at encouraging learners to read various types of digital texts within their interests and current proficiency levels. Considering the ER and blended learning research, the blended ER program’s design used the advantages of online and face-to-face learning components. The online component of this program included digital reading materials and learning management systems (LMSs), Google Classroom and Padlet, to provide learners with a virtual library with open-access digital reading resources and a virtual reading log. The program’s face-to-face learning component involved weekly meetings where learners shared their reading experiences through follow-up ER tasks. This study presents the details of the blended ER program regarding the participants’ ideas. EFL learners’ reactions to the blended ER program led to the conclusion that the program offered myriad opportunities to enhance L2 reading experiences. The study proposes suggestions for effectively integrating a blended ER program into EFL contexts.

Keywords: blended learning, blended extensive reading program, extensive reading in foreign/second language contexts, extensive reading, digital foreign/second language reading
1. Introduction

1.1 Extensive Reading and Extensive Reading Online

Extensive reading (ER) is an approach that provides learners with numerous reading materials within their interests and linguistic levels. ER emphasizes self-selected reading and encourages learners to read for general meaning and pleasure. In contrast to the intensive reading (IR) approach, prioritizing understanding the exact meaning of a text and reading to learn the linguistic features of the text, ER encourages foreign language (FL) learners to read to learn reading (Day, 2018). Day and Bamford (2002, pp.137-139) suggested the top ten principles as a guideline for ER implementations:

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. 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.

A plethora of ER studies have adopted these principles according to their educational contexts and yielded positive outcomes for learners’ language development in different aspects (e.g., Chen, 2018; Fatimah et al., 2020; Pongsatornpipat, 2021). There are numerous approaches to implementing an ER program. ER implementations have varied since ER is not considered a one-size-fits-all approach, as Day (2015) and Green (2005) suggested. Therefore, teachers and researchers should consider their learners’ characteristics and needs, restrictions, and facilities in their educational settings while developing an ER program.

Suk (2017) indicated three prominent components of ER research: appropriate-level reading materials, abundant input, and self-selected reading. These components may enable learners to keep the flow of reading, improve reading comprehension and fluency, and enhance reading motivation and interest. Therefore, ER may serve as a means to enrich learners’ foreign/second language (L2) reading experience by providing a vast amount of input since one of the main features of ER is the availability of diverse self-selected reading materials within or below learners’ proficiency levels (Renandya et al., 2021). Although learners should be provided with a comprehensive selection of reading materials (Bakla, 2020; Ferrer & Stanley, 2016), Liao and Wang (2020) highlighted the insufficient variety of reading materials in promoting an ER program. To implement an engaging ER program, including not only graded readers but also various genres regardless of length is recommended (Green, 2005). The Internet may be promising in providing learners with intriguing reading materials across various topics and genres (Robb, 2018). Since ER is a contemporary and flexible approach, an ER program can include technology and benefit from the advantages of technology, such as accessibility and flexibility of reading materials in a ubiquitous manner. With the use of technology, ER can also potentially facilitate learners’ L2 digital literacy, one of the essential 21st-century skills.

Due to the convenience and accessibility of digital texts, extensive reading online (ERO) programs with a virtual library, including numerous reading materials, have been implemented in different contexts (Puripunyavanich, 2021). Most ERO studies used a subscription-based learning management system (LMS) as a library, such as XReading (https://xreading.com/login/index.php) and ReadTheory (https://readtheory.org/) (e.g.,
In contrast to its material availability and positive outcomes, using a subscription-based LMS may not be feasible for some educational contexts due to financial concerns. Therefore, some ERO programs used open-access reading materials, generally providing short stories and news articles (e.g., Bui & Macalister, 2021; Nhung, 2022; Pongsatornpipat, 2022). Nhung (2022) conducted an ERO study in Vietnam and explored 87 university learners’ views of ERO. Extensive Reading Central (https://www.er-central.com/), an open-access digital platform, provided learners with numerous graded readers. The website has a time-recording function, enabling the teacher to monitor learners’ reading progress. Without the fear of testing, learners read self-selected graded readers digitally outside the class. The qualitative findings revealed the participants’ positive views of the ERO program. The program's positive influence was primarily due to the reading materials with different topics, perceived improvement in their language skills, and accessibility of the website and digital reading. However, the program's main problems were the website's unappealing interface, limited varieties of reading materials, technical problems, and eyestrain. Bui and Macalister (2021) also suggested that unattractive web designs and limited reading materials may discourage learners from reading. A few studies with higher-proficiency level learners allowed learners to access any digital texts of their choice, offering them real-life reading experiences (e.g., Arnold, 2009; Fatimah et al., 2020). Although allowing learners to surf the Internet to read in L2 can enhance their autonomy, confidence, and motivation as L2 readers (Arnold, 2009), not every text available on the Internet may be appropriate for learners below the advanced proficiency level (Zhou & Day, 2021). Considering the issues related to the problems with digital reading materials, there is a need for further ER studies with an open-access virtual library involving various genres within learners’ comfort zones.

1.2 Extensive Reading and Blended Learning

Expanding on the effectiveness of ERO, the integration of a blended learning modality into ER may offer valuable opportunities to enhance learners’ ER experiences further. Through the combination of face-to-face and online learning, blended learning has the potential to compensate for the limitations in ER and ERO programs. The online aspect of a blended ER program may involve a wide range of reading materials at a minimum cost and digital environments to monitor and guide learners online. The face-to-face component can provide real-life interaction with peers and teachers, complementing with follow-up activities to maintain interest in reading extensively and prevent boredom for learners inexperienced in ER (Suk, 2015).

Al Roomy and Althewini (2019) investigated the effect of an ER program integrated with blended learning on learners’ reading comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and reading experiences. The experimental study involved 41 learners at a medical university in Saudi Arabia. Data were collected from pre- and post-tests and an open-ended questionnaire. The experimental group attended an ERO program and the school’s regular reading course for four months. A subscription-based LMS, ReadTheory, provided reading materials, requiring participants to read pre-determined texts on the platform at their own pace outside the class. The face-to-face aspect of the program involved teacher guidance and peer collaboration. The quantitative findings yielded positive outcomes in learners’ reading comprehension and vocabulary knowledge. Additionally, the participants favored reading digital texts at their own pace, collaborating with the other learners, and receiving feedback from the teacher. Given the positive results of their study, Al Roomy and Althewini (2019) suggested meticulously involving a face-to-face aspect in ERO programs. Despite the benefits of blended learning in ER, only a few ER studies integrated blended learning into ER (e.g., Chanthap &
Thus, there is a need for more blended ER programs attentively developed and implemented in different contexts.

### 1.3 Aims of the Study

As mentioned above, there are some limitations in ER implementations, including the availability of various reading materials with different genres, insufficient use of technology, the cost of providing reading materials, and limited teacher guidance (Day, 2015). Therefore, the current study developed and implemented an ER program integrated with a blended learning modality (hereafter the blended ER program) to address the needs in ER research. While the online components of the blended learning modality were digital L2 reading and LMSs, the traditional aspect of the program involved face-to-face meetings through follow-up tasks.

This study was specifically designed to offer valuable insight to language teachers and practitioners to implement systematic and successful ER programs combined with the advantages of blended learning. The study sought to present the details of the blended ER program and propose suggestions on how to integrate it effectively into contexts of English as a foreign language (EFL). Along with the details of the program’s design, the reactions of EFL learners to the blended ER program were outlined in this paper to provide a deeper understanding of the program.

### 2. Methodology

#### 2.1 Participants

The convenience sampling strategy was adopted to select the participants (Creswell, 2012). The volunteer participants in this study were 14 B1 level EFL learners studying in an English preparatory program of a university in Turkiye. They were unfamiliar with reading for pleasure in English since mainly the IR approach was adopted in their reading course, and they were mostly involved in reading based on the course book reading materials. Thus, reading extensively in this blended ER program represented a novel activity for the participants. During the blended ER program, the participants continued attending their regular English classes at school. To assure anonymity, pseudonyms are used instead of the participants’ real names. Participants were assured they were free to opt out of the study at their request, and their consent was taken. The blended ER program was approved by the scientific ethical committee of the university board.

#### 2.2 Tools of the Blended Extensive Reading Program

In light of Day and Bamford’s principles (2002) and the gap in ER research, the blended ER program was developed, involving several tools to increase the program’s effectiveness. Due to the financial concerns and convenience of the Internet, LMSs and digital reading materials were utilized as the online components of the blended ER program. Google Classroom, an LMS used for virtual classroom purposes with archival and posting features, was used as a virtual library. This virtual library was developed explicitly for EFL learners inexperienced in ER and digital L2 reading. Another reason to use Google Classroom was the opportunity to share the virtual library with other teachers for the collaborative use of materials and content.

Along with the reading materials, the necessary links and posts the participants would need were also shared on Google Classroom. Google Classroom as the virtual library can be reached
through the link: https://classroom.google.com/c/NTQ5OTI5MDQyNTE4?cjc=7ta6ve7. Figure 1 shows the interface and posts of Google Classroom.

Figure 1: Overview of Google Classroom

Source: The screenshots of the virtual library created on Google Classroom for this study

After a meticulous selection of reading websites to establish the virtual library, websites with open-access digital reading materials were categorized according to their readability levels. While selecting the websites, the variety of topics and genres and the quality and readability of the texts were considered. Figure 2 presents an overview of the reading materials provided on Google Classroom.

Figure 2: Overview of the virtual library

Source: The screenshots of the virtual library created on Google Classroom for this study

Another LMS, Padlet, an online bulletin board, was employed as a virtual reading log to monitor learners’ acts of reading. The entries required for the reading log were kept straightforward: recording the date, title, and reading time and rating the texts regarding their level of interest and difficulty from 1-5. Rating the interest and difficulty level was required since the participants may tend to read difficult or tedious materials (Arnold, 2009). A post was
pinned to the top of the page as a guideline to keep reading logs. Figure 3 demonstrates the Padlet interface as a virtual reading log.

Figure 3: Interface of the virtual reading log

Weekly meetings with follow-up tasks were the face-to-face learning aspect of the blended ER program since more profound learning experiences unfold when experiences are shared with others (Liao & Wang, 2020). Besides, follow-up tasks were found to be a promising way to keep learners responsible for their reading and develop a sense of achievement (Chen, 2018). Various tasks, such as creating an Instagram post about a text, drawing an exciting part of a text, guessing the characters’ zodiac signs, and reporting the news, were listed in a simple format with their examples. The participants were asked to choose one or more tasks from the list posted on Google Classroom and be prepared to perform them during the meetings. Weekly meetings were held after school hours by one of the researchers of this study. The circular seating arrangement was adopted to increase the interaction within the group. The meeting started with general questions regarding the weekly reading, such as ‘What was your favorite time of day for reading this week?’ and ‘What were the challenges about reading this week?’ Then, the meeting continued with the tasks. During the meetings, the instructor scaffolded and encouraged learners to share their reading experiences in English. All the materials and platforms in the blended ER program were checked by a group of experts in the field, and according to suggested revisions, necessary changes were accomplished to finalize the program.

2.3 Procedure of the Blended Extensive Reading Program

The blended ER program lasted for five weeks. First, an orientation meeting was held to introduce ER, the blended ER program, and its tools. To help learners find the meanings of unknown words without disturbing the flow of reading, some dictionary extension tools embedded in web browsers, such as DeepL and Tureng, were also introduced.

The first week of the program was treated as an introductory week to help learners become familiar with ER and digital reading. Throughout the introductory week, the participants were required only to explore the virtual library and read as much as possible. They were reminded to read for pleasure and choose texts within their comfort zones. Considering the nature of ER, the participants were not restricted to choosing reading materials solely from the virtual library but any materials they wanted. Additionally, a time duration for reading was not set for learners, but they were advised to read as much as possible. On the last day of the week, the first meeting was held, and the participants performed their tasks, asked their questions about the program,
and received feedback from the instructor, if necessary. In addition to the steps in the introductory week, the participants were requested to keep reading logs on Padlet. Throughout the whole program, teacher guidance was regarded as a crucial factor. The instructor helped learners choose appropriate reading materials and guided them to select reading materials that fit their interests. The instructor was also active in the program, following the responsibilities of learners to be a role model of a reader. The same procedure was carried out throughout the remaining four weeks. Figure 4 illustrates the blended ER program’s weekly procedure.

Figure 4: Weekly procedure of the blended extensive reading program

Source: Created by the authors

2.4 Data Collection & Process

This blended ER program was implemented for a total of five weeks, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews following the program’s procedure mentioned above. This study aimed to present the blended ER program and its components; thus, it included the participants’ quotations to provide insight into their general reactions. The interviews were held with each participant to offer suggestions on implementing the program effectively for future ER implementations. The interview questions aimed to explore the participants’ perceptions of the program, its features, and its effect on their reading experiences. To ensure their comfort in expressing feelings, opinions, and views, the interviews were conducted in the participants’ native language, Turkish. To ensure anonymity, the participants were coded as P1, P2, etc.

3. Findings & Discussion

Most participants generally reported their favorable experiences with the blended ER program and appreciated its design. First and foremost, they highlighted the benefits of weekly meetings and follow-up tasks. The following quotation of P9 shows how the participants benefited from these features of the program “Participating in the weekly meetings was a motivational source for me. I started reading regularly to share my reading experiences.”

Some learners further indicated the perceived improvement in speaking skills since preparing a task before the meeting helped them speak in English more confidently. To illustrate, P4 stated, “Preparing what I would share in the meeting beforehand helped me express my reading experiences more easily and prevented me from feeling nervous while speaking.”
participants' remarks indicate the effectiveness of the involvement of face-to-face interaction and follow-up tasks in ER. Considering the positive outcomes of the ER studies involving interaction and follow-up ER activities as echoed by various previous studies (e.g., Chen, 2018; Liao & Wang, 2020; Pongsatornpipat, 2021), the meetings conducted through follow-up tasks were perceived as indispensable features of this blended ER program.

The participants also stated their overall positive perceptions of the blended ER program due to its systematic design and effectiveness in fostering reading motivation. They found the program beneficial and encouraging, with practical features such as accessibility and flexibility. To exemplify, the excerpt taken from the interview of P1 is “The program is both practical and enjoyable, serving as a valuable resource for acquiring new information in English.”

As reported by the whole group, reading interesting materials within or below their proficiency levels also contributed to their positive reactions to the program. In line with numerous ER studies (e.g., Endris, 2018; Wang & Ho, 2019), a wide range of reading materials within learners’ comfort zones was found to be valuable for learners’ interest in L2 reading. Supporting Green’s suggestion (2005) of involving different genres, the participants were also eager to select intriguing texts from a wide range of options, such as short stories, social media posts, articles, and news. P1 expressed appreciation for self-selected reading, stating, “Reading self-selected texts from the virtual library motivated me to read in English more. I read from various sources, such as articles, recipes, and movie reviews.” Another participant, P5, indicated the benefits of reading easier materials, stating, “Reading materials slightly below my proficiency level is more beneficial for me in maintaining sustained engagement in reading.”

The participants also favored the program's online features: the LMSs and digital reading. They recognized Google Classroom and Padlet as easily accessible and practical digital environments. Google Classroom, as a virtual library, was found to be helpful in finding reading materials and needed links with great ease. Padlet, as a virtual reading log, was regarded as an opportunity to observe their own reading progress. Some participants checked the others’ reading activities on Padlet to find engaging reading materials. Additionally, the instructor monitored learners’ reading activities on Padlet. To illustrate, P8 reflected on the LMSs, stating, “Padlet was practical for you (the instructor) to monitor our progress, and Google Classroom as a virtual library was functional for us (the participants) to access the reading materials.”

As Zhou and Day (2021) revealed, digital reading was found to be more advantageous compared to printed reading due to digital reading materials’ availability, accessibility, and flexibility. The following excerpt supports the effectiveness of technology integration into ER.

During this program, I usually read texts related to my hobbies. I read about fashion digitally because accessing printed texts about fashion in English is difficult. I also search for recipes and horoscopes in English on the Internet. I started following some accounts on Twitter for fun. (P13)

Some learners compared the blended ER program with their regular IR classes. Their reading endeavors generally centered around reading the texts in their course books within limited classroom hours. For instance, P11 compared the reading materials used in this program and their reading course at school by stating “I find reading texts in the coursebook extremely boring. I wish we could also select reading materials independently of the teacher in our reading course.” P7 pinpointed the differences between reading in this program and at school,
indicating, “Your (the instructor’s) guidance in choosing suitable materials was valuable for me since I had no idea how to find reading texts in English on the Internet. In our classes, we only read the texts in the books, and that is all.”

This comparison might be the result of ER’s apparent differences from IR (Arai, 2019), including the teacher’s role as a guide, self-selected reading materials, reading independently and for pleasure, and real-life-like L2 reading experiences.

Some participants also pointed out the aspects of the program that could be improved, which can also be regarded as a challenge. Although the participants generally favored reading materials and digital reading, some reported challenges and drawbacks related to this aspect. A few participants asked for printed versions of the short stories, as they had difficulty reading on screen, stemming primarily from distractions and eyestrain. To illustrate, P13 expressed the distractions disturbing the flow of reading by saying “Digital reading has several advantages. However, receiving notifications from applications on my phone, I become distracted and stop reading.”

Some ERO studies also revealed adverse reactions to digital reading similar to the participants’ reactions in this study (e.g., Bui & Macalister, 2021; Nhung, 2022; Puripunyavinich, 2021). Given the advantages and disadvantages of reading materials in the program, some participants suggested reading predetermined materials for some time, as Chen (2018) did. The participants also recommended the availability of both digital and printed materials. Some participants further stated some issues related to the design of the program. The issues were mainly related to the LMSs. Google Classroom was found to be challenging to navigate by P10 “Since there were many posts and websites in the virtual library, Google Classroom was complicated for me.” Some participants regarded keeping reading logs on Padlet as a burden and did not record their acts of reading, although they read regularly. P5 indicated his problem: Keeping reading logs feels like I am under constant control. We could have reported what we read during the meetings.

Another reason for a few participants’ adverse reactions to the program’s design was its implementation independent of the curriculum. To illustrate, P2 pinpointed time restrictions hindering ER experiences, stating, “Although I enjoyed reading extensively, I did not have time for reading regularly due to my responsibilities for the English course at school.” That is, time constraints arising from school responsibilities might have affected the effectiveness of the blended ER program. Due to the limitations of the study’s context, this blended ER program could not be integrated into the curriculum. However, ER might not be considered an approach separate from the curriculum (Green, 2005). Therefore, curriculum designers may consider incorporating ER into the curriculum, taking the positive outcomes of ER into account.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The current study aimed to present the details of the blended ER program with the participant EFL learners’ reactions and propose suggestions for integrating it in FL contexts. The study demonstrated the feasibility of combining the advantages of face-to-face and online delivery of learning. Digital environments may offer learners availability, flexibility, and opportunities to become autonomous in digital L2 reading. At the same time, face-to-face settings may give learners a sense of belonging and chances to cascade knowledge through valuable interaction and collaboration (Banditvilai, 2016). Therefore, implementing similar blended ER programs can be promising to benefit from the advantages of both learning modalities. Several pedagogical implications are drawn from the study, guiding language practitioners, instructors, and educators.
As for the implications derived from the implementation of the blended ER program, the importance of the meetings through follow-up tasks was highlighted by the participants. Thus, ER programs may create an environment where learners can share their reading experiences and exchange opinions about reading materials. In addition, the variety of the reading materials was appreciated by the EFL learners. Including various genres of reading materials with different topics in ER programs can be suggested since all participants enjoyed reading different texts, such as magazines, social media posts, recipes, biographies, and movie review articles. However, most teaching contexts are deprived of establishing a library or subscribing to a virtual library. As this study did, open-access digital reading materials and LMSs can be used. Google Classroom was highly effective as a systematic virtual library, and Padlet was a valuable tool for the instructor to monitor learners and for learners to observe their progress. Regarding the use of reading logs, some learners highlighted its benefits in tracking their reading activities, while some did not want to record the activities they did for pleasure. Therefore, keeping reading logs may be optional, and monitoring can be managed through follow-up ER activities in the classroom (Day, 2018).

Although an orientation session was held, some participants had difficulty reading on-screen and navigating the digital platforms. To benefit from the Internet’s multidimensional aspects, Coiro (2020) underlined the need for EFL learners to be trained to improve their digital literacy skills in L2. Therefore, comprehensive and well-rounded training equipping learners with digital L2 reading strategies can be provided before starting a blended ER program.

Another implication of the study is to increase teachers’ awareness of the effectiveness and importance of ER and technology use. As teacher guidance is essential in ER, teachers should be more knowledgeable and experienced to guide their learners effectively (Macalister, 2008). Therefore, teachers should receive professional development opportunities in ER and technology use, such as workshops and seminars.

The last implication of this study is related to the program’s integration into the curriculum. Considering the benefits of ER, curriculum designers may implement ER as a course or integrate it into a reading class. Based on the participants’ comparison of ER with IR, incorporating the ER approach may yield more favorable outcomes in learners’ language development with enhanced reading experiences. Regarding the overall positive effects of the blended ER program as presented here, future studies can be designed to shed more light on different aspects of blended ER and investigate the long-term effects of such programs on various variables such as learner motivation, reading comprehension, and affective aspects of reading in L2.

References


