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ELT IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD: THE BOUNDARIES AND BEYOND

## Examining the effect of *Readtheory* on EFL students' reading proficiency

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### Abstract

Read theory has been used by over 14,000,000 users but little is known about the effect of *Readtheory* on students' reading proficiency. This study examines the use of *Readtheory* in an EFL Reading class. It involved 72 first-year EFL university students in Indonesia. To measure the baseline and the end line, a free android-based app called *EnglishScore* was utilized. *Readtheory* exercises were conducted in one semester as an outclass activity, embed in a regular reading course. The *Readtheory* program report that consists of text Lexile level progress, the grade level progress, and the ELA standards (key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge) were analyzed to take a deeper dive into students' comprehension levels. As an online resource that is also commonly linked to ER programs, this study also took a survey on the degree of enjoyment that students feel during the *Readtheory* program. The results of the data analysis show that *Readtheory* increased not only students' general reading proficiency but also grammar, vocabulary, and listening proficiency. At the micro-level, the comprehension level of the students on key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge were presented. The students also reported their enjoyment in three out of four dimensions that were asked in the questionnaire. The study implied that extending reading practices beyond the classroom is beneficial and free online resources which offer ease of monitoring should be endorsed and be made as part of school policy or curriculum.

*Keywords:* ELA standards, Extensive Reading, Lexile level, Reading, *Readtheory*

### 1. Introduction

Since the outbreak of Covid-19 which forces teachers and students to adapt quickly to emergency remote teaching, online platforms have become a major part of any classroom, including Reading classes. *Readtheory* is one of the platforms that has been widely used in Reading classes by teachers and students across the globe. The site <https://readtheory.org/> claims that the site has over 14 million users. *Readtheory* is an online site that offers reading comprehension practices for free and it is equipped with an artificial-intelligent system that allows the site to 'detect' the current level of the students then provides the texts for exercises that suit each student. In short, the exercises are individualized. It caters to individual needs and the good thing is that *Readtheory* provides a complete set of students' reports on the exercises. This feature allows teachers to monitor the individual progress easily although she/ he has hundreds of students in the class.

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Even though the site has attracted millions of users, little is known about the effect of *Readtheory* on students' reading comprehension. Empirical investigations on the use of *Readtheory* and its effects are barely found in major research databases. There is, however, one study that examines this implementation of *Readtheory* in a university EFL context (Tempest, 2018). The study highlights the use of *Readtheory* in a university in Japan and reported that the students and teachers had positive impressions about the site. He concluded by saying that *Readtheory* is "useful, easy to use, mobile, and versatile." (p. 90) and is better than other similar sites such as *XReader* and *MReader*. Apart from Tempest's, a study on *Readtheory* is hardly found.

This study seeks to find out if *Readtheory* does benefit EFL students' reading proficiency. Unlike Tempest's study which relies heavily on students' perception in examining the reading progress, this study employed single group pre and post design. To measure the baseline and the endline, a free android-based app from the British Council called *EnglishScore* was used. The present investigation involved 75 first-year university students who took *Readtheory* for one semester as an outclass activity. *Readtheory* report that covers the text Lexile level progress, the grade level progress, and the ELA standards (key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge) were used to take a deeper dive into students' comprehension progress.

As an online resource that is also commonly linked to ER programs (Robb, 2018), this study also measured degree of enjoyment that students feel during the *Readtheory* program. While to some extent the *Readtheory* does not comply with all of the ER principles as proposed by Day and Bamford (2004). But if the level of enjoyment is high and it is aligned with the 'right level of text for each student, it may open the possibility to tweak its use for future ER programs.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 *Readtheory***

*Readtheory* is an online platform that provides free reading exercises for EFL and ESL learners and files their progress report to be used by the teachers. It works with the aid of an artificial intelligence (AI) system to detect the current reading level of the learners then determine the appropriate texts for the following exercise. To use this online platform, a teacher has to set a class in which students can enroll using a certain code. The students who are enrolled in a class will be automatically directed to a pre-test that will measure their reading level. Once the pre-test is done, students can start taking quizzes provided by the website. The teacher is provided with information on the students' progress which covers the students' attempt (number of the test taken and the number of correct/ incorrect answers), the text (including the Lexile and the grade level), and the result (based on the ELA, and there is a motivational knowledge point). The teacher can set the date to view the report on a specific period for each student and the whole class. This easy-to-use feature has attracted more than 14,000,000 users and the number is believed to rise significantly with the outbreak of Covid-19 which forces the shift to remote teaching.

*Readtheory* has been widely linked as one of the sites to promote extensive reading (ER) along with paid sites such as *XReader* and other similar websites. The linkage is likely based on the similarity between the feature that this site offer and the principles of ER. *Readtheory* provides numerous and various text types and topics which are at the students' level. These are mainly the characteristics of an ER program. Nonetheless, the students have no access to choose what they want to read and there are questions (quiz) at every text that students have to answer. These later features are contradictory to the ER principles.

Based on the features, whether or not *Readtheory* aids ER is still in debate. However, some points can be used to support the use of the site. First, it adds the intensity of practice. Renandya (2016) noted that to gain proficiency, EFL/ ESL learners need to extend the practice beyond the classroom. Duration of learning English cannot guarantee the success of learning if the intensity is lacking. Second, the reading passages in the *Readtheory* may serve as language input which is essential for language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Krashen also noted that acquisition may take place if the affective filter is low, which means the students are not under some kind of 'threat'. While the quiz in the *Readtheory* may be seen as a threat, it relatively can be moderated since the quiz does not belong to a high-stake one. Assuming that there are some interesting texts at and below the students' level, there is a possibility that acquisition may take place by reading the texts provided on the site.

## 2.2 Reading proficiency

Reading proficiency generally refers to one's ability and skill in reading. Several works of literature commonly include the terms reading skill, reading strategy, and comprehension to postulate what reading proficiency is. While the three terms have been used for centuries, the definition remains unclear. On some occasions, they are used as synonyms, and on another occasion, they are used inconsistently. Afferblach, Pearson, and Paris (2008) highlighted the issue and propose a way to differentiate reading skills and reading strategy. They argued that the difference between strategy and skill lies in the degree of deliberation/ automation.

“Reading strategies are deliberate goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's effort to decode, understand words, and construct the meaning of the text. Reading skills are automatic actions that result in decoding and comprehension with speed, efficiency, and fluency and usually occur without awareness of the components or control involved.” (p.368)

Further, they add that at one point, due to prolonged practices, the strategy which mainly the metacognition in reading may become an automatic action thus turns into a skill. And this development from effortful to automatic action may occur at every level, from word decoding to critical reading level. From the definition of reading skill and strategy, it can be inferred that reading comprehension is the goal of reading; that the skill and strategies are applied to achieve comprehension. In other words, reading comprehension requires the reader's active extraction and construction of meaning from the text

(Connor and Al'Otaiba, 2008) which can be obtained if the reader has the necessary reading skill and strategy.

## 2.2 Extensive reading

Extensive Reading is an approach to reading that has a strong basis in the SLA theory and a plethora of studies have empirically proven its benefits for language learning. Through ER students will get the input that is required for language learning/ acquisition (Krashen, 1982, 2004, 2020a,b.). Day and Bamford (2002) stated that ER is best explained through a set of principles that covers: (1) the reading material is easy, (2) a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics is available, (3) learners choose what they want to read, (4) learners read as much as possible, (5) reading speed is usually faster than slower, (6) the purpose of reading is for pleasure, (7) reading is individual and silent, (8) reading is its own reward, (9) teacher orient and guide the students, (10) teacher is a role model of the reader. In the practice, the ten principles are often synthesized into four or five points highlighting the importance of students reading a lot of easy self-selected material of various types and topics for pleasure. Reading for pleasure has been the emphasis of ER program. Pleasure or enjoyment is viewed as one of the key components in gaining the benefits of ER. High enjoyment means a low affective filter which is crucial for language input acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Extensive studies have shown how ER which highlights reading enjoyment has resulted in increased vocabulary (e.g. Suk, 2016, Wang, 2013, Pigada and Schmitt, 2006), improve reading rate and fluency (McLean and Rouault, 2017), and helps students' grammar and writing (Park, 2016).

On reading enjoyment, Wilhelm (2017) wrote that it has many forms: immersive, intellectual, social, work, and inner work. Immersive pleasure is when a reader is lost in a book. This is a prerequisite to experiencing all the other pleasures. Intellectual pleasure is when a reader engages in figuring out what things mean and how texts have been constructed to convey meanings and effects. Social pleasure is when the reader relates to authors, characters, other readers, and oneself by exploring and staking one's identity. Work pleasure is when the reader develops a tool for getting something functional done. Inner work pleasure is when the reader imaginatively rehearses for her life and considers what kind of person she wants to be and how she can connect to something greater or strive to become something more. Altogether, these pleasures explain why pleasure reading promotes cognitive and social progress. Data from PISA Report 2000 suggests that finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change. (Kirsch, et al., 2002) and one obvious way for engagement is through sparking enjoyment.

## 3. Method

### 3.1 Research Design

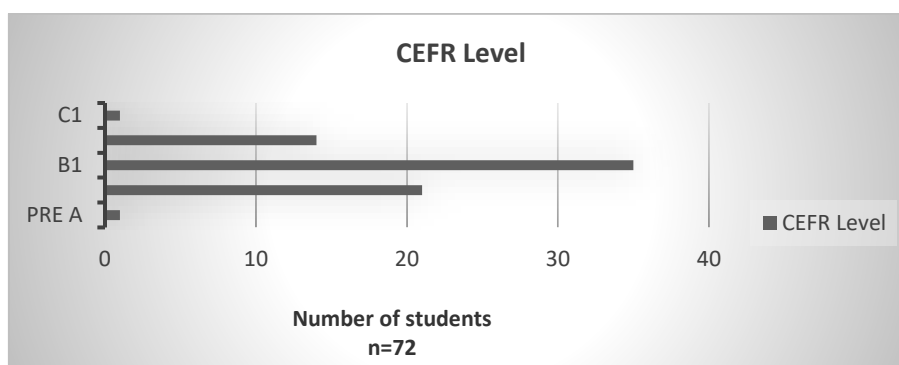
The design of this study is determined by the two research questions: (1) Can *Readtheory* improve students' reading proficiency and (2) Do the students enjoy *Readtheory*? Diverse types of data

are required to answer the two questions and a concurrent mixed method design is considered appropriate for this study. A quantitative approach will be used to investigate whether or not *Readtheory* increases students reading proficiency through single group paired pre and post-test and analysis of numeric *Readtheory* report. Meanwhile, a qualitative approach will be used to find out the degree of students' enjoyment through interviews and surveys.

In this study, the *Readtheory* will be conducted as an outclass activity and serve as an integral part of an EFL Reading class instead of a supplementary. The students are encouraged to do the *Readtheory* exercises on daily basis using the course point incentive mechanism. The students should take the exercises for one semester. Before the implementation, the students take an online test using an app called *EnglishScore* from British Council. The app examines four areas of English proficiency including Grammar, Reading, Vocabulary, and Listening but for this study, only reading scores will be documented. The students retake the test at the end of the study and the scores are then compared.

### 3.2 Source of data

The data for this study mainly comes from two sources: participants and documents. The participants of this study are 72 EFL students from the Department of English Education at a university in Surakarta, Indonesia. They are first-year students and are mostly at A2 and B1 levels in the CEFR.



Picture 1. CEFR baseline level of the participants.

The other source of data is documents which comprise of five *Readtheory* reports available online (grade level and Lexile level text, number of quizzes taken, the knowledge point achieved, and the ELA components score).

### 3.3 Data collection and analysis

The data are collected through 3 techniques: test, survey, and document analysis. A pre and post-test design was carried out using a predeveloped instrument called *English Score* provided by the British Council. The result of the pre-test was compared to the result of the post-test through paired t-test after ensuring that the underlying assumption has been fulfilled.

The survey was intended to measure the students' enjoyment in doing the *Readtheory* program. The questionnaire for the survey consists of 20 close-ended Likert scale questions covering four dimensions of enjoyment: pleasure, challenge/ improvement, competence, and engagement. Within each

aspect, five items of questions were posed. The instrument was adapted from Davidson’s enjoyment scale (2018) which has undergone a rigid and thorough process of validation. A little adjustment was made by reducing one dimension that is considered not appropriate for the context of this present study i.e. collaboration because *Readtheory* is an individualized program

Documents in this study refer to the sets of reports generated by *Readtheory*. Using the teacher account, data on the number of quizzes taken and quizzes passed, the Lexile and grade levels of the text read, also the percentage of types of comprehension questions answered correctly can be retrieved. These reports provide additional insights into the progress that the students made in their reading proficiency

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

This study reveals two points of findings. Each will be elaborated and discussed in the light of existing theories and/ or finding of previous studies.

##### 4.1 Improvement of Reading Proficiency and other aspects.

To measure the students’ reading proficiency improvement, a pre and post-test design was implemented. The baseline was then compared to the endline. *English Score* measurement before the study shows that the average score of reading was 318.7 while the students’ average score at the post-test increased to 364.7. Further statistical analysis was carried out to see if the improvement was significant.

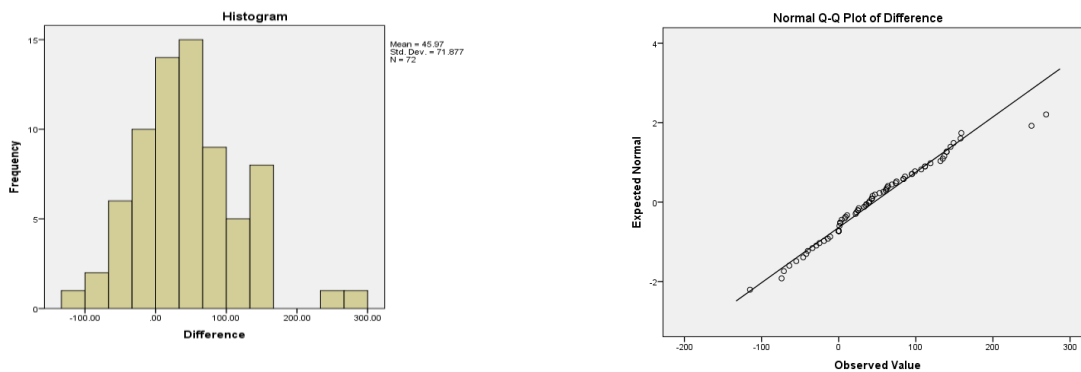
Normality test on the data sets using both *Kolmogorov-Smirnov* and *Shapiro-Wilk* give a significant value that is greater than 0.5. Thus we can be confident that the data are normally distributed.

Table 1. Reading score difference normality test

	Tests of Normality					
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Difference	.080	72	.200*	.973	72	.129

\*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction



Picture 2. Histogram and QQ Chart of Reading score difference

The result means that the assumptions for conducting paired t-test have been fulfilled. The SPSS 24 computation reveals that the students' reading proficiency improves significantly after taking the *Readtheory* program.

Table 2. Reading scores descriptive statistics

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	PRE	318.7222	72	80.00708	9.42892
	POST	364.6944	72	80.40437	9.47575

Table 3. Reading Paired samples t-test

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	PRE -	-45.97222	71.87665	8.47074	-62.86241	-29.08204	-5.427	71	.000
	POST								

Based on the statistical computation, a t-value of -5427 is obtained, and that gives a p-value of 0.000. Since the standard alpha level is 0.5 the null hypothesis which asserts that there is no significant difference between the reading scores in pre and post-test is rejected. There is a significant difference between the reading scores in both tests.

During the program, 72 students took a total of 15,232 quizzes on *Readtheory* and passed 59 percent or 9,048 quizzes. The Lexile level of the text read increased from 724 to 848. Similarly, the grade level increased from an average of 4.8 to 6.2. Considering that *Readtheory* is AI-generated and able to provide the appropriate level of texts for exercises based on the individual student responses, it is fair to say that the increase in the Lexile and grade level is the program response toward the improved responses of the students on the quizzes taken earlier.

A closer look at the report revealed three aspects that comprise students reading comprehension: key ideas and detail, integration of knowledge, and craft and structure.

Table 4. Reports on the Aspects of Reading Comprehension

Aspect	∑Answered correctly	∑Answered incorrectly
Craft and structure	76%	24%
Integration of knowledge	69%	31%
Key ideas and details	78%	22%

N= 72

Of the three indices of comprehension, the students gain the highest on key ideas and details which indicate their understanding of mainly explicit information of the texts that they read. This result correlates to the gain of vocabulary. Numerous studies have reported that there is a strong correlation between vocabulary and reading comprehension. Classic studies indicate that the larger vocabulary size the better for comprehension (Nation and Warring, 1997). This led to the dedicated vocabulary teaching in many EFL classrooms. Later, correlational studies on vocabulary and reading also found incidental vocabulary learning through reading (e.g. Chen, 2020, Suk, 2016, and Wang, 2013); strengthening supports for the implementation of Extensive reading

Apart from Reading, the *English Score* test results also indicate improvements on other aspects after the students take the *Readtheory* program. As presented in Table 5, the mean scores of Vocabulary, Grammar, and Listening increase from test to test.

Table 5. Vocabulary, Grammar, and Listening descriptive statistics

		Paired Samples Statistics			
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	PREVOCAB	372.5278	72	55.56647	6.54857
	POSTVOCAB	398.2917	72	61.71617	7.27332
Pair 2	PREGRAMMAR	345.0000	72	69.40086	8.17897
	POSTGRAMMAR	380.5972	72	60.58114	7.13956
Pair 3	PRELISTENING	322.5000	72	94.17858	11.09905
	POSTLISTENING	375.2222	72	87.56474	10.31960

Having fulfilled the normality test on the difference of pretest and posttest in three aspects, paired t-test was conducted to see the significance.

Table 6. Vocabulary, Grammar, and Listening Paired t-test

		Paired Samples Test							
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	PREVOCAB - POSTVOCAB	-25.76389	49.08328	5.78452	-37.29790	-14.22988	-4.454	71	.000
	PREGRAMMAR - POSTGRAMMAR	-35.59722	57.53374	6.78042	-49.11699	-22.07746	-5.250	71	.000
Pair 3	PRELISTENING - POSTLISTENING	-52.72222	76.61597	9.02928	-70.72609	-34.71835	-5.839	71	.000



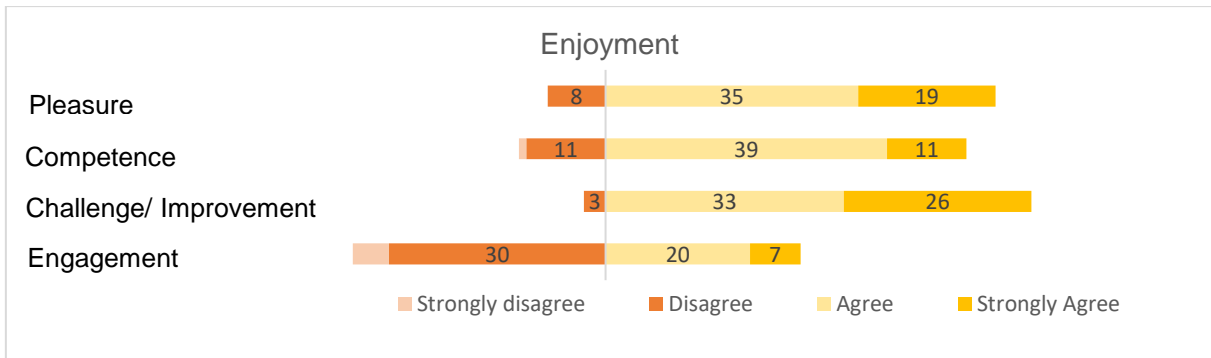
As observed, there are significant differences in the pre and post-test scores in all three aspects. These increased scores on the aspects of reading, vocabulary, grammar, and listening explain the CEFR level improvement of 29 out of 72 participants (40%). As many as 39 (55%) participants remain at the same level and only 0.06 fall of their baseline level.

The positive gains on the students' reading confirms what Krashen's (2008) have mentioned earlier that "we learn to read by reading". Having students read a lot of texts in *Readtheory* is a considered as a way to learn reading by reading. Based on the SLA theory, continues exposure to texts that are comprehensible to the students may lead to the language acquisition (Krashen, 1982, 2008, 2020 and elsewhere). It means, while the students are reading the texts in *Readtheory*, they unconsciously picked up the vocabulary and grammatical structure which lead them to better reading and listening proficiency. The positive results on students' reading comprehension and other skills add to the list of earlier studies which also found that reading a lot of wide varieties and easy materials can enhance students' language proficiency i.e. vocabulary (e.g. Suk, 2016, Wang, 2013, Pigada and Schmitt, 2006); reading rate and fluency (McLean and Rouault, 2017), and grammar and writing (Park, 2016).

#### **4.2 Student Enjoyment**

Measurement of the students' enjoyment addressed four dimensions: pleasure, challenge/improvement, competence, and engagement. These four dimensions were adapted from the five dimensions of enjoyment scale questionnaire developed by Davidson (2018). One aspect that is excluded because of its irrelevance to the current study is 'collaboration'.

In each dimension, five questions were posed. In the aspect of 'pleasure' the questions center on whether or not the student like doing the activity. In the aspect of 'challenge/ improvement', the questions elicit whether the students feel appropriately challenged (neither under nor over) and if they were able to improve from time to time. Questions posed in the aspect of 'competence' seek to know if the students felt proficient or capable of doing the task. Last, in the aspect of 'engagement', the students were asked if they lost track of time and surroundings when doing the *Readtheory*. As many as 66 out of 72 students participated in this study filled in a 20 items Likert questionnaire. The result of the questionnaire is presented in the following diverging stacked diagram.

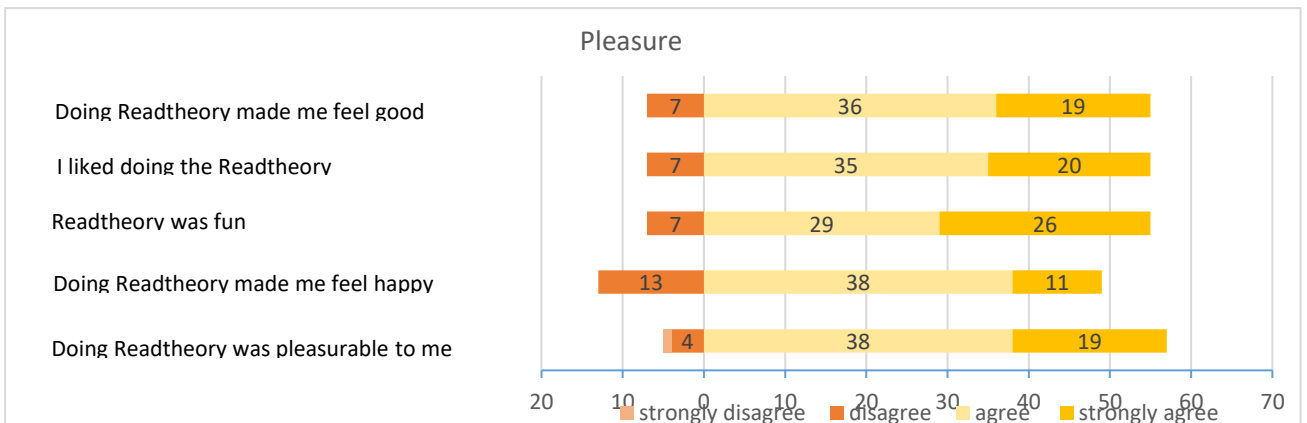


Picture 3. Results of enjoyment questionnaire

A detailed look at each of the aspect is presented as follows.

#### 4.2.1 Pleasure

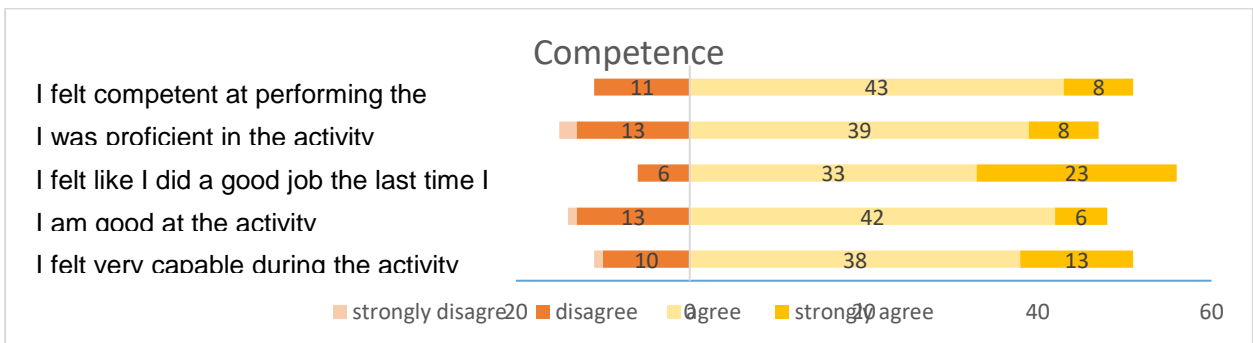
The students admitted that they experienced pleasure in doing the *Readtheory* program. As observed in the diagram (Picture 4), most of the students' answers on all five questions tended to go toward the positive area.



Picture 4. Pleasure

#### 4.2.2. Competence

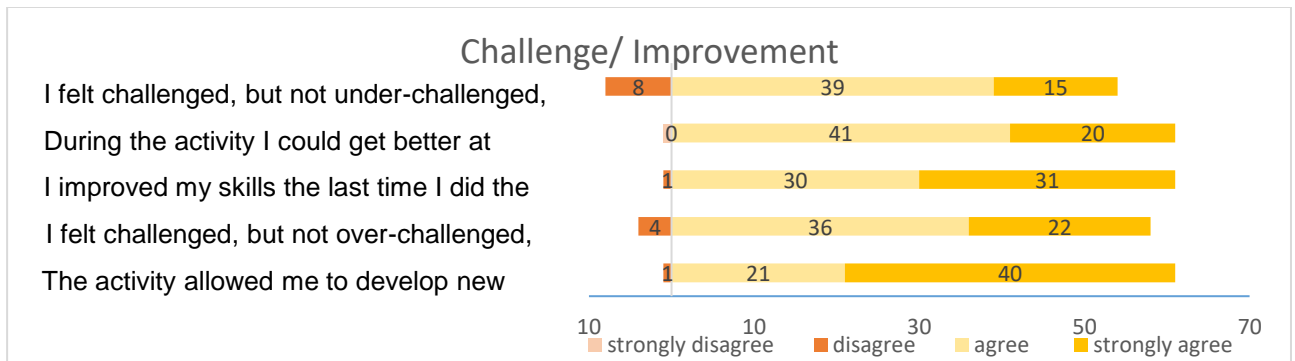
Similar to pleasure, the students agree that they feel capable of doing the program. This suggest that the texts they read are at their level. Having texts that the students feel they can cope contributes to the overall enjoyment.



Picture 5. Competence

#### 4.2.2 Challenge/ Improvement

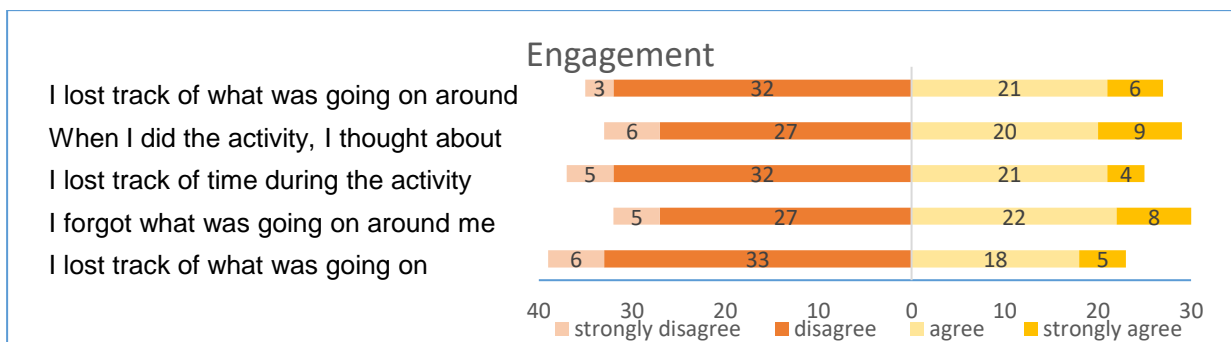
The questionnaire reveals positive results on the dimension of challenge/ improvement as seen in picture 6. The students felt that they were given the right amount of challenge. A task that is too challenging may result in anxiety while a task that is less challenging may demotivate learners. Both extremes potentially lower the enjoyment. In addition perceived right level of challenge, the students admitted that they felt tangibles benefits of doing the program. The two made up the enjoyment in doing the *Readtheory*.



Picture 6. Challenge/ improvement

#### 4.2.3. Engagement

Unlike the three previous dimensions, engagement aspect received relatively more negative responses. While they reported pleasure in doing the task, their engagement was not as high as expected. From the answers, it is predicted that the students' were mostly externally- instead of internally, driven to do the program i.e. to fulfill class assignment.



Picture 7. Engagement

The students' responses on the engagement dimension indicate that the form of enjoyment is not immersive (Wilhelm, 2017). The students admitted pleasure, challenge, sense of success, and tangible benefits that contribute to the overall enjoyment. However, looking at the result on the dimension of engagement, it is predicted that the students will cease doing the program when the external driving factor is eliminated.

## 5. Conclusion

This study concludes that the use of *Readtheory* enhances not only students' reading proficiency but also vocabulary, grammar, and listening. Statistical measurement of the pre and post-test results indicates that the improvement was significant. In addition, the study reveals that the students reported pleasure, challenge/ improvement, and competence in doing the program. This justifies the claim of the program to provide personalized texts to meet the students' level. Reading a lot of texts that students find pleasurable and comprehensible matches some principles of extensive reading. In *Readtheory*, the texts for reading, however, are not self-selected and relatively short. This explains the low engagement of the students when joining the program. The students were indicated to be externally motivated, i.e. to fulfill class assignments instead of internally driven to read the text for pleasure. This lack of engagement to texts, makes the students reading are vulnerable to ceasing. As such, it implies that fuller establishment of ER principles may be more suitable for a lasting program. For EFL institutions, a program such as *Readtheory* needs to be put either as a part of the mainstream or add-on curriculum. Formalizing the program will enhance students' and teacher's motivation to join the program. Prolonged exposure to texts as provided by *Readtheory* benefits the students and at the same time eases teachers in doing the monitoring and evaluation.

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