

# The Promises and Challenges of Online Extensive Reading in Second or Foreign Language Learning: A Systematic Review

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## ABSTRACT

This study is devoted to investigating the benefits and challenges of online extensive reading (OER) in foreign or second language learning. We applied the four steps of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), such as identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. We reviewed relevant studies published between 2009 and 2025 that we identified through major academic international databases (e.g., WoS, Copernicus, and Google Scholar) and Indonesian database, Sinta (Rank 1-2). After screening, we found 25 eligible articles to be reviewed. This study unveils that, to a large extent, online extensive reading can enhance both readers' affective and cognitive development as well as the possible challenges of OER. In the affective domain, online extensive reading can foster participants' reading attitude, self-efficacy, and motivation, all of which are central to language learning. Meanwhile, in the cognitive area, online extensive reading significantly contributes to reading comprehension development and vocabulary mastery. However, some studies report that online extensive reading is unable to improve participants' affective aspects, including reading attitude, self-efficacy, and motivation, as well as cognitive aspects such as reading comprehension and vocabulary mastery, which is partly because of their inability to make use of online features, online reading fatigue, and poor internet connection. This further calls for improvement in those aspects to achieve better online extensive reading promises in language learning.

**Keywords:** affective aspects, benefits, cognitive aspects, challenges, online extensive reading

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## INTRODUCTION

Extensive reading (ER) has long been implemented in English language education and recognised as an effective approach. This activity is suitable for reading activities requiring a long period of time (Nell, 1988). According to Day (2015), the core principles for successful extensive reading include doing lots of reading, selecting their own reading texts, and reading individually and silently. He added that the reading materials are varied

in topics, are easy to understand, and aim to gain pleasure, information, and general understanding. Focusing on language exposure, ER facilitates learners in acquiring vocabulary, improving reading fluency, and enhancing learners' critical thinking abilities (Liu & Saad, 2025) and reading rate (Suk, 2016). Not only does ER influence learners' cognitive side, but it also develops a positive attitude toward reading (Liu & Saad, 2025). ER is even considered to emphasize enjoyment and the volume of reading beyond linguistic

aspects (Nell, 1988), reflecting the key principle of ER in providing pleasure. Therefore, ER should be encouraged for learners, especially those with limited exposure to English resources, such as in the English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) context.

The advanced use of digital devices has transformed the way learners read written texts, shifting from printed to digital formats. Digital reading has become a rapidly growing trend since it is more practical, portable, flexible, accessible, and affordable (Ni'mah & Umamah, 2020). More recently, the widespread accessibility of the Internet and massive use of mobile phones have created the so-called M-Reading or mobile reading. These phenomena have then shifted ER into X-Reading or online extensive reading (OER) practices. A wealth of research has shown the potential positive effects of OER on reading skills. Similar to conventional ER, OER practices also contribute to learners' general reading comprehension (Anggia & Habók, 2025) and fluency (Bui & Macalister, 2021), which is facilitated by vocabulary (Yaseen et al., 2024) and grammar development (Zhou & Day, 2021). With the improved linguistic aspects, OER, in turn, enhances the learners' reading rates (Tabata-Sandom, 2023), indicating increased reading enjoyment (Zhou, 2025), motivation (Anggia & Habók, 2025), and self-confidence (Arnold, 2009). With those dual benefits (cognitive and affective), learners generally perceive the OER practices as positive (Elam et al., 2025; Yaseen et al., 2024). Therefore, teachers should engage learners in meaningful, yet flexible OER practices to boost learners' reading habits and interest (Machfudi & Ferdiansyah, 2023).

Despite the promising benefits offered, OER has its own shortcomings. One of the most critical shortcomings is that not all available online reading platforms are suitable for specific learners.

Problems with platforms, such as the website interface; variety of topics, genres, and quizzes; some technical issues (Nguyen, 2022), can cause difficulty with the online reading (Puripunyanich, 2021). This difficulty may lead to learners' demotivation in performing OER (Bakla, 2020). Physically, reading online for an extended period of time can also cause eyestrain (Puripunyanich, 2021), which can distract learners' focus during reading. From the teachers' perspective, some reading teachers are concerned about particular challenges, dealing with intense schedules, student motivation, the school curriculum, exams, and their own technical expertise (Ucaçelik & Şahan, 2023).

Driven by the extensive research on OER, a systematic review is demanded to consolidate existing findings and pinpoint current trends. Previous research highlighted diverse foci and methodological lenses. While some research centers on linguistically related aspects, such as reading comprehension, fluency, vocabulary, and grammar, others shed light on the affective factors, such as enjoyment and motivation. Methodologically, most research seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of OER through experimental design and presents either teachers' or learners' experience or perspectives descriptively. However, rare studies comprehensively review the existing research reports which can give deeper portrait and transformation on OER in the last 17 years since many of them focused more on the digital extensive reading, not the online one. This current research particularly reviews existing articles regarding the promising benefits and potential challenges in OER practices. More specifically, we break down the benefits into affective and cognitive aspects. Through a landscape of review approach, the current research can provide reading teachers, future researchers, and policymakers with an

insightful reference as a basis for improving the quality of extensive reading practices, especially in online settings. To address those objectives, this research poses the following three research questions.

1. How do online extensive reading (OER) practices influence ESL/EFL learners' affective development?
2. How do online extensive reading (OER) practices influence ESL/EFL learners' cognitive development?
3. What potential challenges do ESL/EFL learners encounter in the online extensive reading (OER) practices?

## METHODS

To achieve the research objective, this study employed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA), comprising four steps: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. We first identified data, including authorship, publication year, research objectives, methodologies, principal findings, and limitations. We screened the data by selecting and examining articles to confirm their eligibility based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, such as: articles published within the last 17 years (2009-2025) published in international (WoS, Copernicus, Google Scholar) and national indexed journals Sinta (1-2), and articles investigating online extensive reading in the ESL/EFL context. The keywords we used to select the articles are “online extensive reading” OR “digital extensive reading” OR “extensive reading on the Internet” OR “online extensive reading in ESL/EFL OR “cognitive aspects in online extensive reading” OR “affective aspects in online extensive reading”. After checking for the inclusion and exclusion criteria, we identified a total of 25 eligible articles to be further included and reviewed to identify emerging trends

regarding promising benefits in two aspects: affective and cognitive. Furthermore, we identified possible challenges that learners encounter in online extensive reading (OER). Based on the analysis, we organised the results into specific points and presented them narratively.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### RESULTS

This literature review on online extensive reading in second and foreign language learning mostly reveals positive affective and cognitive development, which are critical aspects for both second and foreign language learning. The first aspect is affective development, including their reading attitude, self-efficacy, and motivation, among others. The second aspect is cognitive development, such as reading comprehension and vocabulary mastery. The final result highlights some challenges in online extensive reading (OER) practices.

#### 1. The Influences of Online Extensive Reading on Learners' Affective Aspects

In the context of affective development, an earlier study by Arnold (2009) in the area of online extensive reading reported that participants have successfully developed their reading self-efficacy, indicated by their self-posing in more challenging texts and reading strategy awareness. In a similar vein, two studies (Ahour & Ghaderi, 2013; McLean & Poulshoch, 2018), which used multiple instruments including a test, an open-ended questionnaire, and a self-efficacy scale, reveal that the participants of the study develop a sense of better self-efficacy. It is assumed that rich online features, interconnectedness, and varying levels of reading text difficulty can help them have better confidence in

understanding reading texts while online reading.

Another important affective factor, which is affected by online extensive reading, is reading attitude. A study by Coiro (2012), for instance, demonstrates improvement in learners' attitudes and confidence when navigating their reading texts on the internet, which subsequently enhances reading performance. This study further recommends that curriculum developers integrate online extensive reading into their curriculum. Similarly, Bui and Macalister (2021) demonstrate that online extensive reading enhances readers' positive attitude. Their positive affective development is particularly due to the multimodality and practicality of the online reading platform.

In addition to developing readers' positive attitude, myriad studies also prove that online extensive reading has empirically enhanced their reading motivation. Savitri and Munir (2022) and Wilkins (2019), for example, claim that reading through online platforms like *Mreading* provides diverse materials aligned with learners' language levels and interests, enabling learners to feel more connected and motivated in their reading journeys. Tailoring the reading materials to learners' needs strengthens their emotional connections to their reading tasks, creating an environment that supports long-term engagement and success (Ounissi et al., 2025; Savitri & Munir, 2022; Wilkins, 2019). A critical feature of OER platforms is the flexibility they provide, allowing learners' autonomy in selecting their reading materials. Research demonstrates that learners are more likely to engage with reading when they have control over their choices.

Additionally, other studies have confirmed that online extensive reading with varied reading materials encourages learners' persistence, leading to improved vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Al Murshidi, 2014; Yamashita, 2013). Al

Murshidi (2014) observed that learners in a United Arab Emirates university sustained their reading habits when presented with engaging topics, even in the face of challenges such as unfamiliar vocabulary. In a similar vein, Iwata (2022), applying self-determination theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci (2000b), found that online extensive reading programs can enhance intrinsic motivation. However, they noted that, while autonomy and competence improved, relatedness (the social connection between learners) was lacking, especially in the online environment. On the other hand, Chanthap and Wasanasomsithi (2019), employing semi-structured interviews, reported improved reading motivation. A more comprehensive study carried out by Rezaee et al. (2020), revealing both participants' reading motivation and comprehension. Similar findings were reported by some researchers (Hagley, 2017; Hendriwanto & Kurniati, 2019; Shurentsetseg, 2015) that online extensive reading can enhance participants' reading motivation. Furthermore, Hendriwanto & Kurniati (2019) unveil that the participants' reading volume increases, which is partly because of reading motivation enhancement.

Although a large body of research on online extensive reading yields positive findings regarding reading motivation enhancement, some studies report contradictory findings (Bakla, 2020; Milliner & Cote, 2015). Their studies indicate that online extensive reading is unable to improve the participants' reading motivation. Interestingly, Bakla (2020) reports that despite no enhancement, the research participants perceive online extensive reading positively. This further implies that the participants' perception of online extensive reading does not translate linearly to reading motivation. Moreover, it is assumed that some factors that affect

their reading motivation negatively include their digital literacy or technical issues, such as internet connection.

## **2. The Influences of Online Extensive Reading on Learners' Cognitive Development**

Apart from affective development, online extensive reading is believed to enhance participants' cognition, particularly reading comprehension development (Abanomey, 2013; Furtado et al., 2017; Lin, 2014; Milliner, 2017) and vocabulary mastery improvement (Allen-Tamei et al., 2018; Chavangklang et al., 2019; Chen et al, 2013; Wang, 2016). Using graded readers as both learning media and reading resources and the TOEIC reading test to measure the impact of graded readers, Milliner (2017), for example, demonstrates that participants' reading achievement improves significantly. This further implies that online extensive reading has positive effects on their reading comprehension. The online features can be used to highlight and underline the important parts of reading texts, and to check the online dictionary. These features can facilitate them in comprehending the reading texts.

In addition, online extensive reading affects participants' vocabulary acquisition (Allen-Tamei et al., 2018; Anggia & Habók, 2024; Alavi & Keyvanshekouh, 2012; Chavangklang et al., 2019; Chen et al, 2013; Wang, 2016; Zhou & Day, 2021). Tamei et al. (2018), employing both experimental and survey designs, report that participants partly perceive online extensive reading positively and partly negatively; however, their study demonstrate participants' vocabulary improvement. On the other hand, Wang (2016) reveals that the participants' perception of online extensive reading is positive and shows vocabulary improvement. The vocabulary enhancement occurs since online extensive reading provides rich linguistic

features, such as online dictionary interconnection and reading strategy-related features such as highlighting and underlining the important parts of texts. Moreover, multiple encounters with new words and a variety of reading texts offered by online extensive reading allow readers to memorize them better.

## **3. The emerging challenges of Online Extensive Reading in the ESL/EFL Context**

However, several studies show adverse results (Akbar et al., 2015; Milliner & Cote, 2015; Milliner, 2019; Romly, Maarof, & Badusah, 2014). These studies report that online extensive reading used as treatment or reading material is unable to enhance participants' reading achievements. This is partly due to several recurring problems with platforms, such as the website interface; variety of topics, genres, and quizzes; and some technical issues (Nguyen, 2022), can cause difficulty with the online reading (Puripunyanich, 2021). From the affective side, challenges like boredom and tiredness further affects their perception of online extensive reading (Akbar et al. 2015). Not only do the challenges come from the learners, but they also emerge from the teachers. They are facing chaotic schedules, students' low motivation, the curriculum, exams, and technical issues (Ucaçelik & Şahan, 2023).

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of the study reveal that online extensive reading, to a greater extent, has empirically enhanced both affective and cognitive factors. The affective factors include self-efficacy, reading attitude, and motivation. In terms of self-efficacy, several studies reported that online extensive reading can enhance readers' belief in their ability to deal with reading problems. The

development of this affective aspect is due to at least four primary reasons. The first reason is that extensive reading, recommending the readers to read easy and interesting texts or texts within their language competence, allows them to comprehend the texts, and their success in understanding the texts nurtures their self-belief in understanding texts. The study by Arnold (2009) demonstrates that participants' self-efficacy positively develops as indicated by their willingness to challenge themselves to read more difficult texts. The second reason is that the online extensive reading enables them to be connected to features, which facilitate them to understand the texts, including an online dictionary and peer interconnectedness for help seeking when encountering reading problems.

The third reason is that reading extensively, requiring readers to read a large number of texts, allows them to be exposed to myriad topics with different levels of difficulties. Such exposure is crucial to the development of background knowledge. Extensive studies have empirically report that prior knowledge plays pivotal role in reading comprehension. Previous studies also unveil that participants compensate their understanding deficit with their prior knowledge. The last reason is that reading large volume and different types of texts might require them to use different strategies in dealing with them. The frequent use of different strategies to respond to different types of texts will train them to be skillful readers and possess better metacognitive awareness in reading, which further makes them alert to any reading problems they encounter when reading texts.

In addition, online extensive reading develops readers' attitude. Extensive reading gives readers the autonomy to select reading materials in their own interest, and online extensive reading provides countless and varied reading

texts, enabling the readers to find texts of their interest and value. The personal value of the texts further results in a positive reading attitude and sustains their reading activities. Moreover, the positive reading attitude affects their reading volume and textual engagement.

To sum up, the aspects namely the success in dealing with reading problems, technical and peer scaffolding, prior knowledge as well as varied reading strategy use as manifestation of metacognitive awareness develop them to be more confident when reading any types of reading texts, signifying their growing self-efficacy.

The last positive affective aspect generated through online extensive reading is improvement of reading motivation. Extensive reading offering learners' autonomy in reading might make them engaged in reading since autonomy is a human basic need and fulfillment of this need might generate motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Furthermore, online features such as abundant reading texts, and help seeking may help them possess reading self-efficacy, one of the dimensions of motivation. Another aspect of online extensive reading which is believed to promote reading motivation is interconnectedness. Since online features allow readers to be connected both to reading comprehension facilitative features and other readers, online extensive readers are able to build relatedness among them. Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000b) postulates that there are three aspects, which can enhance motivation. They are constructive feedback, autonomy and relatedness.

In addition to affective aspects, the online extensive reading also enhances language skills, such as reading comprehension. The underlying reasons why extensive reading is able to improve reading comprehension are; firstly, this type of reading provides learners with

large amounts of comprehensible input. The exposure to varied types of texts and large volume of texts enables readers to strengthen their ability to process text more fluently. In addition, extensive readers become more familiar with patterns, structures, and vocabulary in context, which later improves their ability to infer meaning. Secondly, reading extensively enables readers to enrich their prior knowledge or background knowledge (schema), suggesting that they have rich 'data' or information of different topics which can be used to comprehend, predict and infer the texts more easily.

In addition to reading comprehension improvement, online extensive reading also enhances their vocabulary mastery. Reading extensively let them engage in multiple reading texts and repeatedly encounter similar words which nurture their working memory for better vocabulary retention. Moreover, instead of explicitly studying word lists, extensive reading allows learners to encounter vocabulary and grammatical structures repeatedly in meaningful contexts. This is a more natural and effective way of building a large and robust vocabulary.

All in all, reading a large volume of text certainly enhances reading comprehension since reading large volume of texts promotes several aspects which are needed for reading comprehension such as growing reading strategy use, background knowledge and vocabulary development. This further implies that reading comprehension is a complex process of making sense of texts which require both cognitive aspects including mastery of vocabulary, rich background knowledge, competent strategy use and affective aspects including reading attitude as well as reading motivation. The benefits of reading extensively for reading comprehension have been empirically proven (e.g., Milliner, 2017).

Apart from the positive effect of online extensive reading on affective factors, some studies report conversely (e.g., Milliner & Cote, 2015). Their studies revealed no improvement in participants' affective factors due to eye fatigue, poor Internet connection, and digital literacy. In contrast, Romly, Maarof, and Badusah (2014) report no significant correlation between online extensive reading and learners' reading comprehension, further implying that this type of reading does not contribute to participants' reading comprehension. This is partly because the research participants encounter Internet-related problems, such as accessibility, poor digital literacy, and online reading fatigue.

The findings of this systematic review imply online extensive reading (OER) practices are promising for the digital age students in EFL/ESL context. The online world enables them to access and read abundant reading materials easily and practically. Moreover, the cognitive and affective benefits that OER practices offer call for reading teachers to engage their students in OER activities. To optimize the benefits, teachers should provide a more tailored and guided instructions, such as by using specific reading log and follow up activities, such as informal group discussion or presentation. Despite the benefits, some challenges, such as health (eye fatigue), internet access, and digital literacy issues should be taken as serious considerations by teachers and policy makers to ensure the effectiveness of OER practices.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, online extensive reading offers promising benefits both affectively and cognitively. The affective aspect development as a result of online extensive reading includes enhanced self-efficacy, reading attitude, and motivation improvement. Cognitively, online

extensive reading has empirically improved either readers' reading comprehension or vocabulary mastery. This improvement is particularly due to the Internet features, facilitating their reading comprehension and online varied English texts. However, empirical evidence also demonstrates that online extensive reading does not affect both affectively and cognitively, which is partly because of participants' poor digital literacy as well as unstable Internet connection, which further calls for attention for digital literacy enhancement and Internet quality improvement.

This systematic review has some weaknesses which might influence the credibility of this research. First, we applied manual data collection steps, especially in the identification and screening process. Therefore, it is very possible that some relevant articles were not included in this research due to human

limitations. Future research should use certain digital application for systematic review research, particularly to identify and screen the articles more accurately. Additionally, we presented the findings qualitatively in a narrative way, without providing tables or figures. It might hinder the readers to better identify the key findings. Future research is recommended to provide quantitative as well as qualitative data presentation to provide more comprehensive findings.

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