

Unlocking Potential: Exploring the Impact of Free Voluntary Reading on Moroccan High School Students

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of Free Voluntary Reading (FVR), or reading for pleasure, on 15 high school students in a rural area in Morocco. The paper explores how FVR impacts Moroccan high school students' attitudes, motivation, perceptions, and habits toward their English language development and language literacy. After a six-month involvement in reading a series of short stories, the 15 participants were interviewed following a semi-structured protocol. The Interview questions were divided into three categories: learners' attitudes and motivation, learners' perceptions of their language development, and reading habits and literacy development. The participants' responses were transcribed, coded, and the findings were presented into seven themes, revealing the positive impact of FVR on students. These themes are Motivation and Engagement, Confidence and Self-esteem, Choice and Learner Autonomy, Reading Habits and New Experiences, English Language Development, Interest in Reading, and Reading Culture. The paper concludes with pedagogical implications and recommendations for further research.

Key words: Free voluntary reading; Literacy; Reading habits; Language development; Attitudes

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ability to read a wide range of topics and genres is a valuable and vital skill for the 21st century education, whether for academic success or for professional sectors. Educators and parents are more concerned with transferring the love of reading voluntarily and for pleasure to young generations convinced that these remain the most valuable skill and habit they should acquire. While literacy development is important, Moroccan students' level is uncompetitive compared to their peers worldwide; Moroccans were found to perform below average rates (World bank, 2020). For example, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), only 27% of Moroccan students obtained Level 2 proficiency in reading, while OECD average is 77% (PISA, 2018). The world-wide assessment and ranking of school-aged children usually puts Morocco at the bottom. A report by the World Bank states:

In 2019, 66% of 10-year-olds in Morocco were not able to read and comprehend a simple text, a score 2.5 percentage points lower than the Middle East & North Africa (MENA) regional average and 10.7 percentage points lower than the lower-middle-income country average (world bank, 2020, para. 5).

In terms of reading skills, the latest PISA report of 2022 reported that Moroccan 15-year-old students obtained "... 339 points in reading compared to an average of 476 points in OECD countries" (PISA, 2022, para. 1). In a different report, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS, 2021) reported that around 59 % of Moroccan students achieved scores below the world average level in reading proficiency (PIRLS, 2021).

Additionally, it has been noticed that students have low achievement in vocabulary acquisition, spelling, reading comprehension, and in writing (El Morabit, 2021). Many students in beginning and intermediate level lack strategies to cope with vocabulary acquisition

(Boudribila, 2019). English language teachers usually complain that students are not motivated enough and do not read outside class. One common practice in language classes is drilling our students on vocabulary, comprehension, and spelling exercises which in turn makes students believe that mastering these drills is the goal and would serve the sole purpose of passing an exam, especially at the baccalaureate level, and therefore, do not see the big picture of developing their reading habits, which in turn decreases their motivation. The question of what motivates and boosts students' reading skills has been a concern of many studies, many of which find that input must be comprehensible to have an effect on literacy development and on language acquisition at large (Krashen, 2003; Krashen, Lee, & Lao, 2017). It has been claimed that to get language learners to pay attention to the input, it should be interesting. According to Krashen (2011), the input that learners are exposed to needs to be compelling and done in a voluntary manner as well.

This paper, therefore, explores free voluntary reading or reading for pleasure among Moroccan high school students in a rural area and its impact on students' reading development and language acquisition at large. It also aims at studying challenges and status of reading for pleasure in Moroccan high school education. It therefore seemed important to collect evidence that furthers our understanding of the value of reading for pleasure and to provide insights and suggestions that will enable parents, teachers, and policymakers to promote reading motivation and wider reading habits.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON FREE VOLUNTARY READING

Free Voluntary Reading is a term coined to refer to any school reading activities that are self-selected, self-paced, and personally interesting to student readers. FVR has been a topic of interest for teachers and researchers alike for years. Research on FVR points out numerous benefits for language learners; these benefits include language development, vocabulary acquisition, reading fluency, building reading habits, and overall language proficiency (Krashen, 2015; Park & Kim, 2019; Sadoski & Paivio, 2013). This literature review explores definitions, theories, and key research findings related to FVR, as well as the instructional implications and challenges faced when implementing FVR in English language classrooms.

2.1 Theories that Explain the Effectiveness of FVR

Several theories attempted to explain why Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) is effective for language learners. These theories include Comprehension and Input Hypotheses, Dual Coding Theory, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), and Self-Direction Theory.

2.1.1 Krashen's Comprehension and Input Hypotheses
Krashen's Comprehension and Input Hypotheses (2003, 2004, 2011, 2017) propose that language acquisition happens when learners are exposed to input (spoken or written language) that is slightly more advanced than their current level of comprehension. It is a theory that is used to explain the effectiveness of FVR. Learners can utilize their existing language knowledge and context to comprehend new words and structures when they understand the majority of the input they receive. According to Krashen, language can be acquired naturally by learners who are exposed to a significant amount of understandable input, similar to how children learn their first language, without requiring explicit instruction or conscious effort.

2.1.2 Sadoski and Paivio Dual Coding Theory

Sadoski and Paivio (2013) proposed the Dual Coding Theory to explain why FVR is beneficial for language learning. According to this theory, readers process both verbal and non-verbal information while reading, which enhances their comprehension and memory of the text.

Day and Bamford (2002) argue that extensive reading improves language learners' reading fluency, vocabulary knowledge, and overall language proficiency because teachers play an essential role in selecting appropriate reading materials, providing support and guidance for struggling readers, and creating a positive reading environment in the classroom. Sadoski and Paivio argue that for FVR to be effective, teachers should provide large quantities of reading material for pleasure rather than for specific purposes. Barcroft (2004) argues that FVR is effective because it provides learners with lexical input (i.e., exposure to new vocabulary) in a meaningful context. She argues that FVR helps learners acquire new words more easily as it allows learners to encounter words repeatedly in a variety of contexts.

2.1.3 Deci & Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (2000)
Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is a common theoretical framework that has been used to explain why FVR is effective (Deci & Ryan, 2000). SDT posits that individuals have innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and that fulfilling these needs leads to intrinsic motivation and positive outcomes. Several studies have examined the role of SDT in FVR and found that when learners have autonomy to choose what to read, they are more likely to enjoy reading, have higher levels of intrinsic motivation, and show better reading outcomes (Kuo & Anderson, 2010; Renninger, Hidi, & Krapp, 2015).

2.1.4 Benson's Self-Direction Theory (2011)

Self-direction theory is another framework in language learning that refers to the ability of learners to take charge of and control their own language-learning processes with a high degree of autonomy and self-regulation (Benson, 2011). Language learning, according to this

theory, takes place when learners set their own goals, plan their own learning activities, monitor their progress, and reflect on their learning. In fact, self-directed learners are responsible for making decisions about what and how they learn, and take an active role in their own language acquisition process (Oxford, 2017).

2.2 Empirical Studies on FVR

Researchers empirically explored the impact of the FVR on student participants' language acquisition, language development, skills, reading fluency, literacy development, writing proficiency, vocabulary knowledge, and reading comprehension and strategies. In this section, we synthesize some of these relevant empirical studies.

Machet and Olen (1996) assessed the effect of promoting FVR on the English language skills of English-as-a-Second-Language learners in two South African schools. The study involved 139 students in an experimental group and 105 students in a control group, all in fourth to seventh grade. Pretests and posttests of reading comprehension were administered to both groups, with the experimental group given time for free reading periods. Results revealed that while the experimental group showed improvement in reading comprehension, only the fourth and sixth grades showed more progress than the control group.

Chang's (2011) study investigated the integration of FVR into college English Reading Class (ERC) to enhance learners' reading proficiency and promote reading for pleasure. Seventy participants were recruited and randomly assigned to either a traditional ERC group or a group that received traditional ERC instruction alongside FVR, which consisted of Sustained Silent Reading (SSR), Self-selected Reading (SR), book presentations, and reading note-taking for a semester. Pre- and post-tests were administered to measure learners' reading proficiency and affective variables in English learning. The reading proficiency test included vocabulary finding, grammar use, text comprehension, and reading speed. The Attitudes and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) and Willingness to Communicate (WTC) scales were used to assess affective variables. The results showed that incorporating FVR into ERC was effective in enhancing learners' reading comprehension and attitudes/motivation towards English learning; the average reading comprehension test results significantly improved after the FVR experience ($p=.000$), but not in increasing their reading speed or willingness to communicate in English.

To explore the benefits of reading for pleasure on language skills, Abdullah et al. (2012) conducted a study over five weeks with an experimental group exposed to reading for pleasure and a control group not exposed. Surprisingly, the control group showed greater improvement in comprehension skills in the post-test, despite similar pre-test scores. The discussion explores the reasons for this result, and 79% of subjects reported

that reading for pleasure would help them understand text better and they would pursue it.

Ogbonna and Eze (2015) examined school library reading programs in Imo State in Nigeria and their impact on free voluntary reading. Access to books, debate, lending of books for personal reading, and assistance in book selection were the most employed programs. However, the study found that secondary school students in Imo state are not reading enough, which could affect their overall educational, social, physical, recreational, and mental growth. The study suggests that school management boards should support teachers and teacher-librarians in developing and implementing a variety of reading programs to encourage students to read more.

Sullivan and Brown (2015) examined the inequalities in vocabulary and math skills among a representative group of people born in Britain in 1970, using the 1970 British Cohort Study. They analyze data from 3,583 cohort members who completed vocabulary and math tests at age 16 to explore whether social background inequalities are similar across linguistic and mathematical domains. The authors investigate the extent to which these inequalities are due to social class, parents' education, home reading resources, and children's reading for pleasure. Additionally, they test the influence of cultural capital indicators, such as playing a musical instrument. The longitudinal analysis considers how different factors affect the growth in differentials during adolescence. Results show that reading for pleasure is strongly linked to cognitive progress in vocabulary and math during adolescence, whereas playing an instrument is not.

Bautista and Marulanda (2018) measured the impact of a FVR Program on two different EFL programs. The main goal of their research was to determine if the program can help improve students' active vocabulary use and self-direction in language learning. The study was motivated by students' reluctance to read, which was attributed to their limited access to books and vocabulary deficiencies. The program was implemented in blended classes in two universities, with 14 and 11 students respectively, who were all classified at the A1 level and aged 16 to 21 years. The research collected data through pre and post-tests, students' diaries, pre and post-implementation surveys, and book reviews. The study found that extensive reading encouraged self-direction, reading habits, vocabulary acquisition, and a more positive attitude towards written stories. Bautista and Marulanda (2018) reported that the learners' active vocabulary use increased in the posttest (pretest = 29 %, posttest = 71%). In addition, learners' positive attitudes of FVR increased by 62%.

Ghali, and Maulani (2019) examined the reading habits and attitudes towards reading for pleasure of high school students. The participants were 41 grade XI students, and data was collected using questionnaires, observations, and interviews. The results showed that during holidays, 50%

of the students read occasionally, 12% read once a week, 9% read once a month, and 29% never read even though books were available. While the students agreed that reading for pleasure has many benefits, the quantitative data revealed their low interest in reading. This may be due to a lack of a reading culture that has not been adequately developed since an early age. Furthermore, the availability and accessibility of reading materials appear to play a role in determining students' reading interest. To address this, reading materials should vary in genres, themes, and forms, both printed and digital, to cater for students' digital nativity. The study highlights the need for libraries with good book collections, facilities, and interesting design to attract students.

Other studies reported positive findings on the relationship between voluntary reading and language proficiency. Krashen and Cho 2019 conducted a study in which they investigated the correlation between pleasure reading and competence in the four language skills. Their findings indicated positive statistical correlations ($p < .001$, both one- and two-tailed). The researchers illustrated the correlation between learners' self-report of voluntary reading and their perceptions of competence in the four skills. Overall, this showed a positive impact of the FVR. In turn, Javid and Al-Khairi (2011) argued that voluntary reading was responsible for more gains in learners' reading speed and reading comprehension. The treatment group's performance was significantly higher than the control group ($p < 0.05$). In terms of the reading speed (experimental condition = 84.5%; control group = 53.3%) and in reading comprehension (27.7% and 13.1%), indicating an overall increase of 31.2% in the reading speed and 14.6% in the reading abilities in the experimental group's achievement. The study also revealed positive perceptions towards pleasure reading.

In addition to Javid and Al-Khairi (2011), other studies reported positive effects of voluntary reading on language learners' attitudes towards reading for pleasure, including King 2021 and Bautista and Marulanda (2018). For example, King (2021) examined how FVR intervention sessions can improve their reading habits. He followed a one-group pretest and posttest design in order to investigate changes in elementary students' reading comprehension and attitudes towards reading. The study revealed that FVR led to positive changes in learners' comprehension skills and attitudes towards reading. Similar conclusions were found by Bautista and Marulanda (2018) who researched the implementation of FVR and its relationship with attitudes towards voluntary reading. The findings implied that FVR brought about positive changes in students' perceptions and improved their reading habits. There was an increase of 62% in the participants who claimed that the FVR program fostered their reading habits and those who read more frequently increased by 24%.

The benefits of FVR on language learning have been continuously demonstrated through research. According to Krashen (2015), FVR exposes learners to new terms in meaningful situations and at a comfortable reading level, making it an efficient method for vocabulary acquisition. He argues that FVR grants the students the freedom to choose reading materials that they find personally engaging, which encourages them to read and aids in their acquisition of new words in useful settings. According to Krashen (2004), FVR should play a significant role in language instruction since it exposes students to a diversity of texts and can foster a lifelong love of reading. According to Krashen, FVR is especially advantageous for language learners who struggle with developing their reading habits since it gives them a stress-free setting in which they practice reading. Krashen (1993, as cited in Whitten et al., 2019) writes:

When children read for pleasure, when they get 'hooked on books,' they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called 'language skills' many people are so concerned about: they will become adequate readers, acquire a large vocabulary, develop the ability to understand and use complex grammatical constructions, develop a good writing style, and become good (but not necessarily perfect) spellers. Although free voluntary reading alone will not ensure attainment of the highest levels of literacy, it will at least ensure an acceptable level. Without it, I suspect that children simply do not have a chance (p. 85).

2.3 Instructional Challenges to Implementing FVR

Given the benefits of FVR, many language educators have incorporated it into their teaching practices. However, there are several challenges to implementing FVR in classrooms, such as providing access to a wide variety of reading materials, monitoring and assessing students' reading progress, and addressing the needs of struggling readers. The following is a list of these challenges:

Access to books, though it is essential for successful implementation of FVR programs, can be challenging and unaffordable for schools with limited budgets and resources (Krashen, 2004). Looking for libraries and academic parties that are willing to donate books and free-access downloadable books can be a practical solution.

Promoting engagement and encouraging students to engage with books can be impeding for students who may not have a positive attitude towards reading or who may not have had many positive experiences with reading in the past (Guthrie, Wigfield, & You, 2012). In this case, instructors can hold individual conferences with students and discuss their attitudes towards reading, and considering the best ways for students to read, taking into consideration multiple intelligences theory.

Creating and developing a positive reading culture in schools and communities is important for promoting FVR. This requires buy-in and support from teachers, parents,

and community members, as well as a focus on building positive attitudes towards reading among students; yet, persistent teachers can make it work.

Balancing reading for pleasure and reading for academic purposes in any FVR programs, avoiding any potential conflict between both types of reading with the need for students to read for academic purposes remains an appealing wish. However, research suggests that promoting reading for pleasure can actually improve students' academic performance (Krashen, 2015).

Addressing Equity and Diversity in reading ensuring that all students have access to books that are relevant to their experiences and interests. This can be challenging in schools and communities with limited resources and where there may be a lack of representation of diverse perspectives in books.

Encouraging Sustained Reading for longer periods of time can be challenging, particularly in an age where technology and social media can be very distracting. Teachers and schools can provide incentives and create an environment that promotes sustained reading.

Addressing Individual Differences among students with varying reading abilities and interests is a challenging mission, especially in finding books that are appropriate and engaging for all students. Teachers can use reading inventories and assessments to determine students' reading levels and interests, and provide recommendations for books that will appeal to them (Guthrie et al., 2012).

Providing Support and Guidance in selecting appropriate books and developing reading strategies. Teachers can provide instruction in how to choose books, how to set goals for reading, and how to monitor comprehension while reading.

Monitoring students' Progress in FVR programs can be challenging, particularly if students are reading books of their own choosing. Teachers can use reading logs, book reports, and other assessments to monitor students' progress and ensure that they are meeting program goals (Krashen, 2004).

Ensuring Sustainability when implementing FVR programs requires long-term commitment and sustained effort from teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders. It is important to ensure that programs are adequately resourced and supported over the long term.

Gap between Intensive and Extensive Reading remains a demanding and far-reaching mission. Transitioning from reading for detailed comprehension to reading for global understanding and pleasure is thought-provoking when implementing FVR since many students are not accustomed to reading outside classroom walls. Teachers and parents alike need to provide guidance and help nurture love of reading. To overcome this, teachers should use graded readers as a tool for bridging this gap between intensive and extensive reading in ESL instruction. Graded readers are books that are

written in simplified language and designed to provide language learners with extensive reading practice in a more manageable and enjoyable way. Graded readers can help students, and provides examples of strategies for promoting engagement and comprehension in graded reader activities.

Overall, the above literature review provides key concepts and issues in implementing the FVR program in schools. A number of research studies reported good potential and positive effects for implementing voluntary reading on students' language skills' development. The current study tries to put the FVR program into practice in a high school setting in order to research its effects and enquire about students' attitudes towards its benefits.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

This study aims at exploring EFL Moroccan high school learners' reading habits as well as their attitudes and perception of the impact of FVR on their English language development.

4. RESEARCH QUESTION

This study attempts to find an answer to the following research question:

How does FVR impact Moroccan High school EFL student participants' attitudes, motivation, perceptions, and habits toward their English language development and Language Literacy?

5. METHODOLOGY

A panoply of the reviewed literature demonstrated that the sweeping majority of the studies conducted on FVR used quantitative pre-/post-method (Bautista & Marulanda, 2018; Chang, 2011; Javid & Al-Khairi, 2011; Machet & Olen, 1996). More research attention should incorporate qualitative methods to investigate and explore the impact of FVR on students' language development. Using qualitative research in FVR is important since qualitative research provides a detailed and comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena that cannot be adequately captured by quantitative research. It helps to explore the subjective experiences, emotions, and perceptions of individuals, groups, and communities on target research concepts (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). In addition to these values of qualitative methods, Creswell (2013) argues that qualitative data provides contextual understanding, which helps researchers explore the contextual factors that influence the phenomenon under study and helps them understand the social, cultural, and historical factors that shape it. It also allows the researchers to involve in engagement with participants,

which can result in more self-assured ethical research practices. For these reasons, qualitative semi-structured interviews method was adopted to collect data regarding students' perceptions and attitudes towards the impact of FVR on their language development.

This study was conducted in a rural public high school in the region of Marrakech in Morocco. A total number of 15 students volunteered to take part in the FVR program in the 2022-2023 school year. The participants were in grade twelve, their last year of high school. The program started in November 2022 and ended in April 2023. A wide range of short stories or graded readers were brought into class and arranged according to the level of difficulty. Next, the participants walked around the class and picked a story they liked to read and took it home. Then, once a month, the teacher and participants would meet for an hour to voluntarily share ideas and comments about their readings. After the program ended in April 2023, the first author interviewed the students and audio recorded the interviews (See Appendix A for interview questions). The audios were then sent to the second author to listen to. The authors then transcribed and coded the interviews. Seven themes emerged from the transcription. The authors presented and discussed the themes.

6. FINDINGS

The purpose of this research is to determine how FVR impacts students' attitudes of reading and their perceptions of their language development. The thematic analysis is selected to analyze the qualitative data collected in this study. A number of themes and subthemes emerged upon collecting and analyzing codes. There are seven major themes which are illustrated below, including motivation and engagement, confidence and self-esteem, choice and learner autonomy, reading habits and preferences, English language development, interest in reading, and reading culture.

6.1 Motivation and Engagement

Motivation is one of the concepts that have been well-researched in the field of applied linguistics (Bonney et al., 2008; Chang & Huang, 1999; Dornyei, 2001; Wu, 2013). It is a prerequisite for achieving a good command of language proficiency. According to Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), motivation in reading is regarded as a complex concept which encompasses intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, reading goals, social motivation for reading, and self-efficacy. Dornyei (2001) stated that "motivation is an abstract, hypothetical concept that we use to explain why people think and behave as they do" (p. 42). On the other hand, engagement, according to Hiver (2021), is intrinsically linked to how well a learner is involved in a learning task and "the extent to which that physical and mental activity is goal-directed and purpose-driven". In academic research, engagement is directly

related to positive academic outcomes (Christenson et al., 2012). Educational psychology has examined engagement and considered it a state of involvement and attention in learning tasks (Philp & Duchesne, 2016).

When we talk about reading and encouraging students to read, especially at home, one of the recurring themes is learners' motivation and engagement (i.e. intrinsic motivation). The latter is considered key for long-term reading engagement. More than 75 % of the interviewees expressed that the FVR reading program was effective in increasing their motivation to read for pleasure. Hafida said that "*some stories touched my heart*". Another student said that "*the more I read, the more I enjoy it*". A considerable portion of our sample reported finding positive engagement in their selection of the graded readers. Radia expressed that "*I live with the story*". In the same vein, Ikram I commented that "*I feel as if I am part of the story*". Khadija excitedly commented: "*I fall in love with reading in English*". Zeineb added: "*I like this program so much*". Such testimonies show that FVR and providing a healthy learning atmosphere can foster learners' engagement with reading materials, which in turn can encourage long-term reading habits and goals.

Based on our monthly meetings, it was observed that the FVR program improved the participants' motivation, engagement, and enjoyment in reading. Likewise, Clark (2011) surveyed 18,000 young people and found that the vast majority enjoyed reading. In fact, they were six times more than those who did not enjoy reading. Feeling motivated is considered an important condition in language learning (Baaqeel, 2020). A well-managed FVR program can boost young students' motivation to read, improve their behavior, and encourage independent learning (Bautista & Marulanda, 2018). Similarly, Efendi (2021) argued that students are found to be more motivated when given the chance for pleasure and enjoyment.

Clark and Rumbold (2006) also discussed the impact of motivation on voluntary or pleasure reading. The authors investigated motivation for reading and suggested a number of ways to increase reading for pleasure amongst youth. A key finding in their research was that intrinsic motivation plays a bigger role than extrinsic motivation in instilling a love of reading in young people. The researchers added that pleasure reading has positive effects on learners' cultural knowledge, general knowledge, and community participation. This entails that reading programs be encouraged and spread in all levels in education. Krashen (2011) emphasized that a key element in establishing pleasure reading is providing a variety of interesting reading materials. This can affect learners' motivation which has a critical impact on the acquisition of all language skills (Ellis, 1994). On the part of language teachers, Dimitroff (2018) reported that they have a role in improving learners' attitudes and engagement. One important condition for achieving this goal is that teachers

should keep reading materials relevant to their learners' interests, level, needs, and age. In addition, it was claimed that motivation is correlated with choice (Haugnes, 2021). This can lead to fostering positive attitudes towards reading.

6.2 Confidence and Self-esteem

An issue that many EFL learners face is lacking enough self-esteem and self-confidence to read in a foreign language, especially in beginner and intermediate levels. Self-confidence and self-esteem are intertwined and they are both instrumental in language learning. Self-confidence is an important attribute in an individual's perception of one's self. Self-Confidence is seen in one's ability to deal with and tackle challenges and issues successfully without leaning on others (Ahmadi, 2020). Maslow and Rogers (1980) pointed out that self-confidence shows a person's overall assessment of someone's self-worth. Rubio (2007) wrote that self-confidence is manifested psychologically and socially. He explained that low self-confidence could cause a negative impact on foreign language learning. Brown (1994) illustrated that self-esteem is directly related to having a sense of self-worth.

During the interviews, we noticed that a number of learners voiced their views of the connection between voluntarily reading stories at home and the rise in their confidence level. It was mentioned that this experience has increased their self-esteem and confidence even though it was a very gradual process. The fact of self-selecting their reading materials seemed to have a positive impact on their attitudes, on their self-confidence, and in terms of feeling competent in their reading habits. For example, Hayat said that: *"I feel proud of myself after this program"*. Also, Yassin said: *"the more I read, the more I understand"*. To support this claim, Zeineb commented: *"the more I read, the easier it becomes"*. Zeineb continued saying that: *"I can feel that I succeeded in my reading challenge"*. Ikram 2 said: *"I feel comfortable with my English"*. These testimonials show that being self-confident and nurturing this quality could yield more desirable reading outcomes. Baaqeel (2020) claimed that self-esteem enhances students' willingness and adventure in their language learning experience. FVR provides a great opportunity for learners to enhance their confidence in reading abilities and to nurture their reading habits and positive attitudes.

Inside EFL classrooms, there should be room for developing learners' self-confidence, through creating environments which provide healthy learning spaces where learners feel respected, important, and heard. We need places which encourage learners to express themselves, to grow, and to make mistakes, free of judgment or anxiety of making mistakes. Krashen (2022) advises language teachers that voluntary or pleasure reading should not put pressure on learners to turn in any proof of reading the selected materials. A condition

that if met along with giving learners freedom of choice would yield significant results on the part of learners. Based on what the participants expressed, we could infer that EFL learners' confidence can be enhanced through making graded readers available to them and at the same time requiring the least accountability for reading and completing their reading homework.

6.3 Choice and Learner Autonomy

Participants in this program also reflected on the importance of the outcomes of the FVR program. They reported that the fact of self-selecting their own reading materials encouraged them to read more, to appreciate it more, and to explore different kinds of graded readers. The participants' reactions imply that being able to select the books to read has a positive impact on their motivation, engagement, and autonomy. In literature, a number of terms have been used to refer to autonomous learning, such as learner autonomy, self-directed learning, learner responsibility, lifelong learning, and learning to learn (Joshi, 2011). In turn, Sinclair (2000) mentioned a few characteristics of learner autonomy. He pointed out that learner autonomy as a competency is not inborn; it consists of a learner's willingness to take charge of their own education, and it can take place within classroom walls and outside. He stresses that learner autonomy entails conscious awareness of the learning process.

Around 65 % of the interviewees mentioned their appreciation of being given choice of what to read. Giving teenagers choice and several rich options in deciding on their reading selections was thought of very positively amongst all participants. This practice seemed to be very beneficial in increasing learners' engagement and motivation, which are considered essential for a successful reading program. For example, Zeineb said that: *"I appreciate the freedom in choosing my own stories ... I can feel that I succeeded in my reading challenge"*. Others mentioned that they appreciated the freedom that was given to them in the sense that they were free to choose the story that liked and keep it for a flexible stretch of time. For example, Ikram 2 commented: *"I feel free when I read the stories that I picked"*. Clark and Rumbold (2006) found that there was a positive relationship between choice and affective aspects of reading including engagement and motivation. Allowing students to practice autonomy in their reading material selection seemed to impact their attitudes and feelings towards reading, especially in relation to classrooms and school subjects where this was not the norm. A key observation during the interviews is that the participants appreciate autonomy and choice, which, according to them, are intrinsically related to their increased self-confidence and feelings of accomplishment in reading. Haugnes (2021) found that his secondary school learners highly preferred being given freedom of selecting their readings over those chosen by their teachers. Haugnes further comments that students'

choice and motivation seem to be directly correlated. In turn, Allred and Cena (2020) investigated how choice can affect high school students' reading motivation. Their findings revealed that students' lack of interest in reading can be traced to the absence of positive interesting experiences with reading. The authors argued that allowing learners some freedom to choose their readings increased their motivation and interest in reading.

Giving students the opportunity to make their own decisions is essential for the success of self-guided reading programs. It is claimed that language learners achieve greater results when they assume responsibility for their own learning (Bajrami, 2015). Instilling a sense of self-directed learning in our youth is priceless; it facilitates a life-long learning journey, encouraging students to be autonomous learners.

6.4 Reading Habits and New Experiences

The FVR program has the potential of being a transformational experience for young people and aid them to establish good fresh reading habits. FVR gives students opportunities to meet new characters, read about new places, and encounter ideas and experiences that might challenge them. A number of students expressed such feelings. For example, Khadija said: *"I discovered how other people live and think"*. Youssef added: *"I take lessons from the stories"*. Radia said: *"I live with the story"*. The fact of helping students experience worlds beyond those that they have been familiar with allows them to see and have new perceptions of their lives, their own culture, and their dreams.

The interviewees' perceptions of their personal reading habits have been subject of change. More than 50 % of the participants reported that the FVR program has a positive influence on their reading routines. Fatima 2 and Ikram 1 both said that they *"... can't wait to finish one story to select a new one"*. Ikram 2 talked about her own change in reading habits and commented: *"I feel as if I am part of the story"*. In turn, Yassin and Brahim said that the FVR program pushed them *"...to read more often"*. However, some interviewees expressed ambiguous perceptions towards the FVR program. Two of the five male students, mentioned that they have challenges reading extensively in English. They commented that they prefer reading short works and within short periods of time. This is something that was not raised amongst the female participants. Our study did not have this difference in perceptions as an objective of this research. This could be a topic of further future research. The question of encouraging and pushing adolescents to read more is an issue not only for Moroccan students, but also in other countries. Other previous studies raised the issue of a decline in reading habits among school-aged children and young adults (Clark & Picton, 2020; Rideout & Robb, 2019).

Some of the interesting observations during the interviews are that some the participants expressed their

preference of reading about other cultures and the fact of having a variety of books at their disposal. They explained that reading about life experiences from different cultural perspectives encouraged them to read and enjoy it more. Approximately 35% of the participants felt that the FVR program has allowed them to explore other cultures and places. For example, Hayat said: *"when I read, I experience new things, places, and ideas"*. Voluntary reading can be a real transformational experience, especially when students are immersed in rich new reading experiences, which can allow them to grow and nourish their thirst for learning. In addition, around 50 % of the participants highly appreciated having variety in terms of topics and length of books available to them.

6.5 English Language Development

There is an intrinsic relationship between language skills and rich reading experiences. Krashen (2022) once mentioned that students who read voluntarily usually are found to excel in other areas and school subjects. During our interviews, a few questions targeted enquiring about any connections between the FVR program and learners' performance in other related language skills. More than 70 % expressed positive effects of voluntary reading on their linguistic development. For example, Zeineb said: *"I acquired more vocabulary than I can learn in class alone"*. Ikram 2 added: *"reading helps us develop our minds, level, and communication"*. To support this claim, Radia commented: *"I feel that I learned more vocabulary unconsciously"*. Ikram 1 further illustrated *"I feel comfortable with my English in every part, reading, writing, and spelling"*. khadija also mentioned: *"I have new ideas"*. Likewise, Ikram 1 added: *"when I read a text for class or in a test, I find that I understand most of it"*. In turn, Soumaya said: *"I discovered that I recognize 75% of the words when I read a text"*. Zeineb further added: *"this experience generally has a positive impact on my English level"*. It is critically important for young learners to see the value of reading for pleasure and its positive effects on their personal and academic achievement. There is evidence that concluded that there is a positive correlation between reading enjoyment, reading frequency, and attainment (Clark, 2011; Clark & Douglas, 2011).

Implementing FVR can significantly affect learners' language skills' development, especially that of vocabulary learning (Atilgan, 2013; Bautista & Marulanda, 2018; Fan, 2016; Krashen, 2016); writing skills (Lee & Hsu 2009; Pradana, 2016); grammar mastery (Khansir & Deghani, 2015; Stokes, Krashen & Kartchner, 1998). In addition, Damayanti (2021) conducted an experimental study which revealed that learners who experienced FVR achieved better results in terms of reading comprehension in comparison to those who were not exposed to the FVR. Overall, having learners regularly practice FVR outside class is linked to better gains in reading assessment (PISA, 2009).

6.6 Interest in Reading

Along with motivation and engagement, students' interest can be considered a key ingredient for establishing a successful reading program. More than 50 % of the participants emphasized the importance of having interest for a rewarding FVR program. Half of the participants in this program have already embraced the habit of reading for pleasure, particularly in Arabic. For the last 5 years, our school has taken part in the Arab Reading Challenge. The latter has encouraged both students and teachers to establish reading clubs and organize competitions for the participants of different levels and ages. During the interviews, several students explained that interest is a prerequisite for taking the habit of reading, but when asked about their peers and classmates, they explained that many lack interest in reading. For example, Hayat said: *"students don't read, are not interested, have no time, are always on the phone, or find it boring"*. In the same line of argument, Soumaya and Brahim claimed that *"students lack desire to read for pleasure"*. Hassan mentioned: *"Lots of students don't like to read"*. Participants consistently discussed the notion that teachers and schools should take more responsibility and help in instilling a love of reading in their students. Having interest in reading is a key factor behind student reading engagement and habits. Efendi (2021) pointed out that voluntary reading can improve and expand learners' reading habits and increase their vocabulary acquisition.

In broad terms, students' interest in reading is based on the fact that learning and progress is critically linked to learners' inquisitive mind and increased interest in reading. Clark and Phythian-Sence (2008) inferred that interest and choice in reading materials are linked to each other and influence young learners' preferences. In order to achieve significant impact of student reading, the habit of reading should be rooted in learners' personal interests and background (Allred & Cena, 2020).

6.7 Reading Culture

There is a need to address the issue of lack of interest amongst our student population. It has critical effects on several academic areas and their school performance at large. Several interviewees voiced their opinion of the fact that lack of interest is a serious problem. Around 75 % of the participants said that their friends and peers do not read and dislike it, especially that of assigned school readings. The reasons that some of them mentioned include social media, lack of reading culture, and bad peer influence. For example, Brahim said that many of his classmates: *"...are always on the phone"*. Fatima 1 added: *"the majority of students don't read"*. In the same vein, Fatima 1 and Khadija argued that: *"students lack a culture of reading"*. Research has found that parental involvement in their children's literacy development has a vital role in their academic success. It is actually

believed to have a stronger impact than their parents' social class, family size, or level of education (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004, as cited in Clark & Rumbold, 2006). Young people who tend to come from backgrounds and homes where reading is valued and considered as source of entertainment are found to be more likely to nurture their intrinsic motivation for reading.

Around 45 % of the participants in the FVR program argued for a need of role models and inclusion within educational institutions to nurture and encourage a culture of reading. 35 % of the participants claimed that one of the reasons for poor reading culture is that most students come from impoverished communities, where reading is neither a habit nor a priority for families. Some of the learners provided a few suggestions in order to deal with this issue. For example, Fatima said that schools and teachers should *"...organize competitions and reading challenges"*. To support these suggestions, Hafida emphasized that teachers *"...should help and encourage students to read"*. To make that effective, Ikram 2 added that *"schools need to be equipped with libraries and that teachers should raise students' awareness of the value and importance of reading"*. Krashen stresses that the more access students have to books, the more reading they accomplish. He further argues that direct encouragement can also lead to more reading (Krashen, 2004).

The thematic analysis above revealed that the FVR program has improved learners' motivation, attitudes, self-confidence, and reading habits. A great number of participants stated that taking part in the FVR program has allowed them to see the great benefits of voluntary reading as well as fostering their intrinsic motivation for reading. Furthermore, there has been an increase in reading habits and learner autonomy. It was believed that learners' increased sense of autonomy is tied to experiencing a good level of intrinsic motivation (Patall, Cooper & Wynn, 2010).

Some of the participants were not very motivated at the beginning of the reading program, but with time and the more they read, the more interest they had for reading. On the other hand, it is undeniable that nurturing a habit of voluntary reading requires direct involvement of all parties, parents, teachers, and school boards. The habit of reading is not deep-rooted in our education system, and thus our young learners need encouragement, advice, and support. Krashen argues that encouragement can lead to more reading. Well-managed voluntary reading programs have a great deal of benefits on the part of language learners, such as strong reading comprehension, grammar mastery, positive reading attitudes, and overall language development. Unlike regular language lessons, through voluntary reading, learners can use different contexts clues to understand a text and develop their overall language proficiency.

7. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS FOR FVR

The study at hand has revealed that the FVR program was successful and effective in fostering students' motivation, engagement, reading habits, and attitudes towards reading for pleasure. Although our study is not one of a large scale, there are a number of pedagogical implications that we can draw and share.

First of all, based on the students' feedback, it appears that the vast majority of respondents claimed that the FVR experience has played a positive role in improving their motivation and attitudes towards reading. They reported that this experience fostered their reading habits and love of reading. Implementing voluntary reading in schools does not require lots of effort or funding.

In EFL classes, a few suggestions could be followed to spread and nurture positive FVR experiences.

- Teachers can launch reading circles within their schools.
- Engaging students in selecting reading materials.
- Facilitating discussions led by teachers and/or students, either within their usual meetings or they could set a time slot outside their school schedule to meet for a hour of sharing their readings. Such activities will render great rewards in the long term (Momtaz & Garner, 2010).
- Students need time to read and a place to read, with access to lots of interesting reading material (Krashen, 1997).
- Exposing learners to rich variety of graded readers.
- Encouraging choice and autonomous learning.

In our study sample, few students reported having challenges in committing themselves and in keeping reading routinely. There are a number of alternatives to encourage reluctant readers to engage in independent reading, such as:

- Organizing trips to the library (Krashen, 2011) and guiding and motivating students, especially struggling readers.
- Providing a variety of texts in terms of genres and level of proficiency.
- Having teachers intervene in assisting students with low reading comprehension abilities in selecting reading materials that suit their level (Krashen & Cho, 2019).
- Encouraging students to voice their reading preferences and interests.
- Avoiding incentives (Krashen, 1997). Motivation to read should be intrinsic.

Building the habit of reading can not only enrich conversational every day language (Lee, 2019), but also academic language. Ghania and Khalid (2022) argued that FVR facilitates acquiring the linguistic competence that students need to effectively comprehend academic texts. Overall, the ultimate goal is to nurture a habit of reading for pleasure, self-accomplishment, and academic success. Helping learners sustain interest in reading outside the classroom walls is considered a critical goal in their educational achievement. When students are given choice and feel they are independent in their reading habits, they feel more accountable of their own learning and development.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings collected from the interviewees cannot by any means be conclusive since the sample is relatively small. Certainly, a larger sample can yield more detailed information from our respondents on the merits of FVR. Also, the participants' beliefs and attitudes towards reading in general may not be typical or generalizable to other educational settings in the country. In addition, the reliability of the study's findings can be enhanced through including other tools such as observation or artifacts.

The conclusions reached in this study are insightful and encouraging in the sense that the participants' overall satisfaction of FVR is high. This had positive effects on a number of constructs, such as learners' perceptions, motivation, and reading habits, and it is considered an essential alternative for sharpening their skills. Furthermore, it is undeniable that the FVR has great merits on the part of learners; however, there is a need for specific study of the impact of voluntary reading on the different language skills. Some important variables that came up during the interviews and deserve further research are students' economic background, gender, and family influence. Another research idea is to conduct a large-scale study across several schools, along with surveying teachers to find out their perspectives on voluntary reading and self-selected reading.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that the implementation of FVR in a high school level education context has improved learners' motivation and attitudes towards reading and has made very positive changes in their reading habits. Our study has also contributed to the understanding of the FVR program and its relationship with learners' development of different language skills. The participants also provided positive feedback on how voluntary reading altered their perceptions of reading for pleasure and its benefits. Wilhelm (2016) claimed that pleasure or voluntary reading can yield a number of benefits for learners, including intellectual, play, social, work, and inner pride. Everyone seeks to obtain one or all of these. When observing the Moroccan system of education, it is found that satisfaction, pleasure, and enjoyment are not considered in designing the curriculum. Similarly, a great number of learners confirmed that taking part in this program fostered their confidence and feelings of being independent readers and learners. Additionally, the current study findings have implications for other language learners who would like to try and take the habit of reading for personal satisfaction and attainment.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

After taking part in the FVR program, the participants were invited to sit for an interview. Its aim was to enquire about their attitudes and perception of the 6-month period of involvement in voluntary reading. The interview questions targeted three main areas: attitudes and motivation towards voluntary reading, perceptions of language development, and development of reading habits.

Learners' attitudes and motivation

- How did FVR change your perception of pleasure reading?
- To what extent did FVR increase your motivation?
- In what ways do you think participating in this program made you enjoy reading?
- Do you like talking about the stories that you read to your family/friends?
- What do you think about the topics of the stories that you read?
- Do your friends enjoy reading? Why do you think they do or do not?
- Do you think it is important to be a reader? Why?

Learners' perceptions of their language development

- In what ways do you think free voluntary reading has impacted your vocabulary growth?
- Have you noticed any changes in your reading fluency since you started engaging in free voluntary reading?
- In what ways do you think free voluntary reading has impacted your writing skills?
- How did FVR develop your knowledge of the world / other cultures?
- Overall, do you feel that engaging in free voluntary reading has had a positive impact on your overall language proficiency? Why or why not?

Reading habits and literacy development

- How often do you read for pleasure?
- Do your family members read at home?
- Do you have a personal library at home?
- How much reading have you done in the past 6 years, before starting the FVR program?
- Have you noticed any changes in your reading habits since you started engaging in free voluntary reading? If so, what are they?
- In what ways do you think having access to books encourages you to read more?
- Can you describe any challenges or obstacles you have encountered when trying to engage in free voluntary reading? How did you overcome these challenges?
- What recommendations do you have for teachers who want to encourage their students to engage in free voluntary reading?