



## Using Informal Articles in Extensive Reading (ER) Program: A Personal Experience

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**Abstract** : In this digital age, *informal articles* which contain some valuable informations and extensive input to develop the learners' language proficiency are easily found on internet or other reading sources. Unfortunately most literature shows that *informal articles* are not widely used in extensive reading (henceforth ER) program. For this reason, the paper introduces steps procedure in using *informal articles* as authentic material in one semester ER program for Indonesian EFL college learners. The procedure is developed on the basis of my great interest in creating innovative way in teaching ER at one of the State Institute for Islamic Studies in Indonesia. The proposed steps are expected to be an alternative pathway in teaching ER for English teachers particularly at a college-university level.

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### INTRODUCTION

ER practice has grown in popularity in recent years. It is an important aspect of any English as a Foreign (EFL) or Second Language (ESL) reading program. A single definition of ER is likely hard to find. The summary of various research by Susser and Robb (1990, p. 165) came to a working definition that ER is reading of large quantities of material or long texts for global or general understanding with the intention of obtaining pleasure from the text. ER can also be defined as: 'Students reading a lot of easy, enjoyable books' (Helgesen, 2005). Richards & Schmidt (2002, pp. 193–194) define ER as "reading in quantity and in order to gain a general understanding of what is read. It is

intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading". Some alternative terms for ER are *pleasure reading*, *sustained silent reading*, *free voluntary reading* or *book flood*.

ER has been proven to give impact on learning English in both ESL and EFL contexts or classroom settings. There have been a number of studies that have demonstrated the effectiveness of ER and that have provided support for the use of ER. The investigations have tried to look at both language learning and the affective dimension of language learning, primarily attitude and motivation. The results of the studies on the benefits of ER are that, among others, ER

increases the students' reading rate (Bell, 2001; Kusanagi, 2004; Taguchi et al., 2004; Iwahori, 2008), general language proficiency (Bell, 2001; Sheu, 2003; Iwahori, 2008), reading strategies & motivation (Nishono, 2007), and writing proficiency (Mason & Krashen, 1997).

In relation to the benefits of ER, then the ways to implement it should be paid more attention. Although there are various ways of implementing ER in educational settings, the top ten principles by Day and Bamford (2002) are considered to be a good guideline for conceptualizing ER in a teaching/learning process. The ten fundamental principles are that 1) the reading material is easy, 2) a variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available, 3) learners choose what they want to read, 4) learners read as much as possible, 5) the purpose of reading is usually related to pleasure, information and general understanding, 6) reading is its own reward, 7) reading speed is usually faster rather than slower, 8) reading is individual and silent, 9) teachers orient and guide their students, and 10) the teacher is a role model of a reader.

Although these principles are a good guide for educators who teach or run an ER program, the adaptation to the principles is needed as necessary depending on the situation. In line with Fuisting's (2014) viewpoint, the ten principles can actually be broken down into five areas, i.e., reading material, material selection and target, the purpose, reading style, and teacher's role.

### **Reading Material (Principle 1 and 2)**

In relation to reading material, principle 1 and 2 suggest that easy and varied materials on a wide range of topics must be available. ER program needs easy texts or reading materials to improve the reading speed and fluency. Besides, Helgesen (2005) suggested that the material should be enjoyable or interesting for the readers. But, who knows that the texts are easy to understand and enjoyable? Easy and enjoyable,

in my opinion, are two relative terms and, of course, can only be determined by the readers. However, as Day and Bamford (2002) acknowledged, the use of easy material is controversial. To accustom students to real-world reading, real-world texts or authentic materials should be used for extensive reading. This is to confuse the means with the end since to encourage students to be motivated to read more and study more, and to facilitate them to improve their foreign language reading, they must be provided with reading texts they find easy and enjoyable at every step of the way.

In addition, the availability of varied reading material will not only encourage the students to read but also lead them to read for different reasons (e.g., Entertainment; information; passing the time) and, consequently, in different ways (e.g., skimming; scanning; more careful reading).

### **Material Selection and Target (Principle 3 and 4)**

Since the readers need to have easy and enjoyable materials, then the learners have to determine what they want to read (principle 3). As the consequence of this freedom of choice, the students are not to read the same written texts because it seems impossible to get a single text that all members of the class find it interesting. Each student has their own preferences. One may prefer love story, one prefers reading about health, and others may read tips or etc. The differences of the preference should be respected. The learners are also free to stop reading anything they find to be too difficult or that is out of their interest.

In relation to the reading target, principle 4 suggests that learners read as much as possible. In this case, the students ideally spend most of their time for reading as the core activity in this program and the amount of time spent actually for reading is the most critical element in learning to read. There is no upper limit to the amount of reading that can be done, the students read a

lot or read as much as possible. The question then is what is the criteria of *a lot* here. In this case, Bamford and Day (2004) suggest that “a book a week or 50 pages a week” is realistic. Anderson (1999) suggests that 200 words per minute is a useful and realistic goal for second language readers.

### **The Purpose (Principle 5 and 6)**

In an ER program, reading is just as like reading in everyday life. The goal is not one hundred percent comprehension. For this reason, extensive reading is not usually followed by comprehension questions. The focus shifts away from comprehension towards the reader's personal experience. The learner's goal is sufficient understanding to fulfill a particular reading purpose, for example, the obtaining of information, the enjoyment of a story, or the passing of time (Day and Bamford, 2002). However, in my viewpoint, college learners as adult learners should be accustomed to real-world reading, real-world texts or authentic materials. In other words, they need to read information which is beneficial for their real life situation beside reading for pleasure.

Dealing with the sixth principle, ‘reading is its own reward’, Prowse (2002) suggested that the use of quizzes and other form of tests is strongly discouraged. Instead, the use of reviews and discussions can be utilized to measure if the students have engaged with the book (Bamford & Day, 2003). However, many institutions insist on formal assessment of the reading since, for example, ER is a compulsory subject in a college program and the lecturers have to give the score. As an alternative solution, the teachers might grade the students by the number of pages or words they have read. Teachers might also have them to write or present oral reports and summaries or make posters and presentations that summarize the content of the reading text.

### **Reading Style (principle 7 and 8)**

In ER, the students usually read faster and silent. That is why, to be able to read fluently, the learners should read material that is well within their linguistic ability. Day and Bamford, (2002) added that, in the service of promoting reading fluency, the students are not suggested to use the dictionary when they find words they don't understand. ER is a chance for the students to keep reading and to practice such strategies as guessing at or ignoring unknown words. This is somewhat controversial for not using the dictionary, moreover if EFL readers do not find the appropriate graded readers. During reading, the learners build a personal interaction with the text. They read at their own pace, in their own time when and where they choose. It is also possible to be done inside the classroom when part or all of a classroom period is set aside for silent.

### **Teacher's Role (Principle 9 and 10)**

In ER program, the teachers should guide their students as well as become a role model of reader. Since ER is very different from usual classroom practice, students thus need careful introduction. Teachers can introduce the methodology of extensive reading, beginning with, for example; material selection, the (absence of) assessment, the reading purpose, the reading style, etc. The teachers have to help the students with vocabulary and grammar problems, and even culture found in some parts of the reading materials.

In relation to their role as a role model, teachers do not sit idle or do things other than reading, no matter how important these "other things" are. The teachers should be reading something just like the rest of group in the classroom. As the role model in the classroom, they have to show that they like reading and that they are good, efficient and effective readers.

This paper deals with the reading materials in ER program. Some literature suggests the use of simplified books or graded

readers indeed. But, what written texts to use for ER program in the institution in which the graded readers are difficult to find? That is why, the term *book*, in my opinion, does not mean that the book is the only source of reading material in ER program. Any reading material can be used, including informal articles. Even, in this digital age, *informal articles* which contain some valuable informations and extensive input to develop the learners' language proficiency are easily found on internet or other reading sources. Unfortunately most literature shows that *informal articles* are not widely used in ER program. For this reason, the paper introduces steps in using *informal articles* as authentic material in teaching ER for Indonesian EFL college learners. The purpose of this paper is to propose a well-defined ER course in which interaction can take place without any stressing atmosphere. The procedure is developed on the basis of my great interest in creating innovative way in teaching ER at the institution where I teach, one of the State Colleges of Islamic Studies in Indonesia.

### **Informal Article; What and Why?**

An article is a piece of writing usually intended for publication in a newspaper, magazine or journal. It is written for a wide audience, so it is essential to attract and retain the reader's attention. When it comes to the style of writing, it will be of two types; formal and informal. In formal article, the use of colloquial expressions, contractions, cliches, abbreviated words, imperative voice are strongly avoided. The writer of formal article also avoids addressing readers using second person pronouns. Longer and more complex sentences are preferred. Meanwhile, in informal writing style, colloquial words, contractions, cliches, abbreviated words, and imperative voice are oftentimes used. The writer may address the readers using second pronouns and short and simple sentences are usually utilized. In this digital age, informal article is easily found either on printed or online (internet) media. Despite informal

article might not sound academic, its existence cannot be taken for granted.

In this paper, I have some basic reasons why the use informal articles in ER program is suggested; it deals with, among other things, the content of the materials, the students' characteristics, as well as the unavailability of graded readers in my college library. Informal articles can be authentic source of input for the readers (or college learners) since it contains a lot of valuable and beneficial information needed in real life situation. As authentic material, this sort of text is actually written for native speakers, not for language learners, or not for language teaching purposes (Jordan, 1997). However, authentic texts are important for language learning, because they increase students' motivation for learning, and expose them to 'real' language (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Gilmore (2007) also points out that authentic materials had been used for language learning several decades ago and have regained their popularity due to the rise of the communicative approach. Informal articles contain real language produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort. The content of this sort of materials, in my opinion, is really appropriate with characteristics of EFL college students as adult learners. As adult learners, they need to be exposed to real life information they need, not merely to artificial text. Their needs, their interest in topics, and language situations they find useful might be covered in it. Besides, reading this sort of material could make them learn more words, acquire more grammatical structures, empower them with extensive vocabulary and syntax (Guo, 2012), connect students with the real world, and keep them informed. It will expose them to English usage as well as it is used in real life, thus students may find them more interesting and relevant if they are at the right comprehension level. In short, informal article available in printed or online media is or can be a useful authentic material for ER program.

Other reason deals with the availability of books in college library and students' reading habit. Informal article is used since simplified printed books or graded readers are not easily found in my college library. As one of the alternatives, informal articles can be utilized to intrigue and stimulate students' reading habit since it seems that many of them become more passive and reluctant in regard to reading. They just do no more than what is required. As Floris (2008) points out that it is necessary for incorporating authentic materials in the course design because they are more motivating, engaging, and relevant to students' lives. The use of authentic material in this kind of situation had been pointed out by Yu (2007) in which she utilized articles from The New York Times to promote cadets' English. Yu discovered positive effects of authentic materials on group discussions as well as presentations. She also found improvement in vocabulary and verbal expressions, a better understanding of cultures, and higher motivation. Those are some reasons underlying the use of informal article as authentic material in my EFL college ER program.

It might be widely known that the use of authentic materials has been strongly debated because of its complexity in vocabulary and structures especially for lower-level learners. However, Baleghizadeh's study (2010) showed that the concerns could be overcome by adequate assistance. His study justified the incorporation of authentic reading materials as long as it was accompanied by the teachers' facilitation because the argument of linguistic complexity interfering with comprehension can be easily resolved by teachers' facilitation and students' interaction with teachers. To this end, this paper tries to introduce the steps procedure of using authentic informal articles in ER program.

### **Proposed Procedure**

In this section, I would like to briefly report the steps procedure of using *informal*

*articles* as authentic materials in ER practice in my college in which ER subject is offered at the fifth semester after they passed Reading Comprehension 1, 2, and 3 course. The procedure is developed on the basis of my experience and of my great interest in creating innovative way in teaching ER at one of the State Colleges of Islamic Studies in Indonesia. The proposed steps are expected to be an alternative pathway in teaching ER for English teachers particularly at a college-university level. The proposed steps can be presented consecutively as follows:

### **Opening Phase**

Opening phase may look simple and trivial, but substantively, in my opinion, this is a vital step in ER program in which the program is carefully planned and prepared. Due to its complexity, I have thorough planning and maximum preparation in my ER program. In this phase, one semester ER program is introduced and the students are told the goals of the program. It must be explained to the students what are going to do in the ER program during the semester. I ensure that the students understand and are familiar with what the goal and the objectives are. Asking students about their attitudes and past experiences of reading might also be challenging.

In my ER class, it is explained that the students will have two main activities; out-of and in-classroom activities. Out-of-classroom activities cover 1) students select their own materials, 2) students read on their own time and place, and 3) students reflect what they have read in the provided form and/or a poster. In-classroom activities may cover 1) students-students and teacher-student dynamic interaction and 2) individual classroom presentation. Meanwhile, the teacher will act as a role model and as an evaluator (if needed).

### **Self-selection of Informal Articles as Reading Material**

After the students understand the goal, the objectives, and the activities during the

program, the next step is self-selection of informal articles by the students. This is certainly out-of classroom activity. Because informal articles are sort of authentic materials, they can be easily found either in printed or electronic media. They can be found in newspaper, magazine, or online media or internet. In this digital era, however, internet is the most suggested source to obtain informal articles. The students may find a lot of texts suitable with their topics of interest.

When the students decide to utilize internet for searching the materials, they may use search engine, e.g., google search engine, and should be smart in typing the keywords. The ability to choose keywords effectively will be very helpful in finding the articles needed. They may search the article as many as they need. The following figure shows the example of search result of informal article on ‘the benefits of something’ by using google search engine.



**Figure 1: The example of keywords insertion**

Figure 1 shows us the sophistication of google search engine. It suggests us some choices even before we finish typing our

keywords as if, as some people said, it can read ‘God’s thought’.



**Figure 2: Example of Google Search Result**

Figure 2 shows the search result using key words '*benefits of honey*'. The students may choose the articles in which the language is easy or on their level.

### Reading as Much as Possible Individually

After selecting and obtaining the articles, reading the printed and obtained articles individually and silently is the next activity in which the students read on their own time and place. The students should read as much as possible, no limitation of page number. They are free to choose the place for reading (e.g., in bedroom, living room, canteen, classroom, etc). The time allocation is not limited as well. They may stop reading whenever they feel tired, get bored, no longer interested in the topic, or find too many unknown words. In other words, they are free to take other reading material whenever the topic is out of their interest or the language is too difficult. To avoid boredom, the materials students read should be within their level of comprehension, at their current proficiency

level, not above their linguistic level. If students find their appropriate level they can make progress in reading quite smoothly and thus develop their reading fluency. On the contrary, if the reading material is too difficult for readers and they have to look up too much unknown words in a dictionary, ER turns into intensive reading.

### Summarizing and/or Reflecting on the Articles in the Provided Form and/or in the Poster Form

After reading the articles, the students then come to a post reading activity. To control their activity, they are asked to write a short reading reflection of every article they have finished reading. They should write the reflection in the form that I have provided and submit them in every meeting. The following is the form students in my college use in their ER classes. It covers the title, number of pages, author, reflection, as well as new words.

**Table 1: The Form to Write Reading Reflection**

01	Title of Article	
02	Number of Pages	
03	Author	
04	Date of Publication	
05	Reflection	
06	New Words	

This form asks them to simply summarize what happened in the article and give their opinion. It can function to raise what Gardner (1993) calls as students' 'linguistic intelligence'. Asking for their opinions about the article is an attempt to encourage them to incorporate their feelings (intrapersonal intelligence) and process at a level of evaluation or appreciation. Besides, another interesting activity to control their reading activity is by summarizing the article in the form of poster. It is to disseminate the article message and can be done in group. The poster might be presented in campus events or by inviting the students from other

classrooms. Displaying the posters in the classroom can also create a pleasant atmosphere and gives students the possibility to share their experience.

### Teacher as a Role Model

While the students are having their reading activity, which is mostly done at home, I should be an extensive reader as well and give a good example of reading activity. I have to show that I also like reading and I am a good or effective reader by doing the same activity as the students. I might tell what I have read, share the reading experience to the students in the classroom, and invite



questions or comment from them. By so doing, the class will be very lively and natural language activities will occur.

### **Students-students and/or teacher-student Dynamic Interaction**

After selecting, reading, and summarizing the articles which are

done out of the classroom, then the students come to an in-classroom activity; sharing information in the form of 'students-students and/or teacher-student dynamic interaction'. Figure 3 is one example of situations of sharing session in my classroom.



**Figure 3: The Situation of Sharing Information Session**

In this session, of course, the students have a lot of thing to talk about, i.e.: things related to what they have read, and that are ready to share with me and other students. The students may have face-to-face talks, share information, and ask questions each other. Although the students are not told to do, real questions, high level questions, opinions, and feelings are asked naturally. They may change their conversation partner whenever they have finished one topic. I also engage myself in this dynamic interaction through sharing the result of my reading to the students. It is very beneficial to show that the teacher is also a good reader and/or role model of reading. Besides, I use this session to monitor the students' reading as well. I use one-to-one interview to check whether they are reading.

### **Classroom Presentation**

Classroom presentation is another in-classroom activity in my ER program. Among the articles they have read, the students have to choose one of them that they like best to share individually in front of the class. They have to present the article in, for example, power point slide and have to be ready whenever their friends ask some questions. In this activity, of course, I divide the class into several groups that are in charge of presenting the article for each meeting. Besides, I should be able to arrange the time allocation effectively. The following table might be the model of one-meeting activity in which the time allotment is 100 minutes and there are 5 students to present their articles.



**Table 2. The Sample Model of One-Meeting ER Activity**

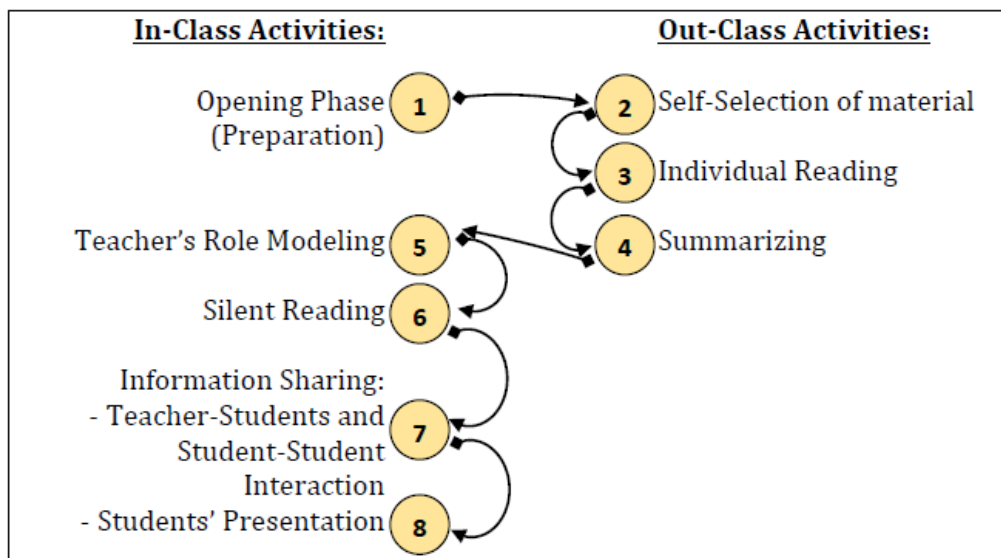
<b>Activity</b>	<b>Time Allocation (100 minutes)</b>
<b>Pre activities</b>	
1. Opening and/or greeting	3 minutes
2. Submit thereading summaries by the students	2 minutes
3. Checking the students’ attendance	5 minutes
<b>Main activities</b>	
1. Students-students and/or teacher-student dynamic interaction	15 minutes
2. Students’ presentation	
a. Student 1	10 minutes
b. Student 2	10 minutes
c. Student 3	10 minutes
d. Student 4	10 minutes
e. Student 5	10 minutes
3. Questions-answer session	20 minutes
<b>Closing</b>	5 minutes

**Evaluation**

In my college, ER is a compulsory subject and, consequently, I have to give the score at the end of the smester. It might contradict with the sixth principle of ER by day and Bamford (2002) stated that reading is its own reward. So, I ususally determine the students’ score on the basis of the number of

articles they read or the summary they submitted, their poster, their oral presentation, and face-to-face interview.

These are activities of ER program in my college and figure 4 might help us summarizing the activity chain of ER by means of informal articles.



**Figure 4: The Activity Chain of ER Program by Means of Informal Articles.**

Although this ER program might be quite interesting both for teacher and students, I also got positive and negative comment

when I did informal interview with some students of mine related to the implementation of ER by means of informal

articles. The positive comments, among others, are that:

- The students got no difficulty in finding the articles on the web and even internet activity is enjoyable. Hundreds of useful articles are available for free.
- It is very interesting since they may choose their own reading time, not always limited in the classroom
- Information sharing session is very beneficial for them since it occurs naturally and what they got is a lot of new real life information which they need as adult learners.
- Searching and reading informal articles make them curious on new information and this feeling brings them eager to read more and more.

Despite the positive ones, there are also, according to the students' point of view, some shortcomings of the implementation. Among others are that:

- Writing and submitting the summary and/or reflection of the articles in every meeting are sometimes boring. For them, it is time consuming.
- Once in a while, they got difficulty in finding the articles in which the difficulty level of the text is at their level. It is, in my opinion, natural since informal articles are categorized as authentic materials and most of them are unsimplified.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It should be noted that the use of this sort of reading material described in this article is due to the absence of graded readers in college library. Taking into account the multiple positive impact as well as the merit of using informal articles in ER program, especially real life information and various grammatical structure contained in it, it is important to use them whenever possible. However, this article is open for criticism since it contradicts with a numerous articles

suggesting to use graded readers in ER program. Nuttall (1996:178) states: "authentic material is the ideal, but if you cannot find enough at the right level, you will have to use simplified or specially written materials to begin with". Therefore, in this case, the role of library is felt to be a paramount importance. It has to facilitate those who couldn't find the right level of text by providing, for example, graded readers; books or texts of various genre with controlled syntax and lexis.

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