USING INTERACTIVE FICTION IN EXTENSIVE READING: ACTION RESEARCH FOR ENGLISH-MAJOR FRESHMEN AT A UNIVERSITY IN CENTRAL VIETNAM

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Abstract: This research aimed to explore the attitudes of Vietnamese English-major freshmen towards the use of interactive fiction (IF) in extensive reading. Action research was adopted as the research method, with the population of 40 freshmen at a university in central Vietnam and the researcher acting as the teacher delivering the reading lessons using IF. The research instruments consisted of the teacher's journals and three questionnaires for the students. The findings revealed that most of the student participants engaged in the study had a positive attitude towards the use of IF in extensive reading. A majority of the students perceived IF to be effective in arousing their curiosity, engagement, and involvement in the reading process. In fact, they strongly agreed that they became more involved in reading activities when the teacher used IF as extensive reading material in class. Most importantly, a large percentage of the student participants found IF very useful in motivating them to maintain the habit of reading in English for pleasure.

Keywords: Interactive fiction, extensive reading, reading skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, owing to globalization and the growing demand for international communication and trade, English has been given a great deal of due consideration in Vietnam. Students of different age groups are expected to learn and master the four skills of the language. Of these skills, reading has been regarded as "the most important academic language skill for the second language [and] provides the foundation for synthesis and critical evaluation skills" (Murcia, 2001, p.188). However, to our knowledge of Vietnamese learners of a foreign language or English language, many of the learners seem to be reluctant to reading or find it struggling to comprehend long reading texts or novels.

A great deal of interest in extensive reading (ER) has been regarded over the last decade as an important path to enhancing first and second-language literacy for learners (Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Hedge, 2000). Bamford and Day (1997) define ER as reading a wide variety of texts in order to achieve overall comprehension. Reading extensively, readers are more concerned about the meaning of the text than about the meaning of particular words and phrases.

Regarded as an integral part of Extensive Reading, Interactive fiction (also known as IF) - a form of text literature, which allows the reader to participate in the story by making choices, happens to be particularly motivational for many students (Pereira, 2013). The narrative branches along various paths, typically through the use of numbered paragraphs or pages. Each narrative typically

does not follow paragraphs in a linear or ordered mode. Interactive fiction is often recognized as digital game-books which are also called "Choose your own adventure" books or CYOA (Nelson, 1995). While interactive fiction usually involves elements of game-like problem solving, it is also a legitimate genre of literature (Aarseth, 1997). The choice format of interactive fiction has been proved to be familiar with teachers of English as a second language (ESL) as a way to motivate reluctant students to read, develop critical thinking skills, and organize classroom activities (Ferlazzo, 2009). Interactive fictions are useful because they provide students with more opportunities to use their own language to respond to what they read and thus will develop their reading skills (Pereira, 2013). IF is written in such a way as to encourage students to discuss, connect, and play with the text (Hargreaves, 2007). In comparison to reading a traditional novel, IF reading requires a higher level of emotional involvement, particularly in light of manipulation and distributed knowledge (Gee, 2003; 2005). Given these above-mentioned benefits of using IF, IF reading should be introduced to students of English of different levels. A considerable number of studies on how IF is beneficial to ESL learners in different contexts in the world (Desilet, 1989; Gee, 2005; Laurence, 2007; Pereiera, 2013), research of this kind still seems to be left unattended in the tertiary educational context in Vietnam.

It is hereby proposed that the study would elevate this field of interest by seeking out the answers to the two research questions:

1. What are the English major freshmen's attitudes towards the use of interactive fiction in extensive reading?

2. What possible effects are perceived by the freshmen using interactive fiction in extensive reading on their reading skills?

Within the scope of this paper, the findings of the first research question will be presented in this paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Extensive reading

There is a great deal of evidence that extensive reading has had a powerful influence on language learning. Over the last few years, the concept of extensive reading has been interpreted in several ways. According to Bamford and Day (2004), extensive reading is "an approach to language teaching in which learners can read a lot of simple content in a new language" (p.1). They also noted that students can select their own reading materials depending on their interests, which will allow them the privilege of reading independently. These advantages of ER ensure that the students are likely to avoid reading any content that is not of importance to them. According to Bamford and Day (2004), in an extensive reading setting, students are required to read with a broad and general sense of the text and read for knowledge and satisfaction. Gradually, students develop up a reading pattern that will allow them to have confidence in learning the language (Bamford & Day, 2004).

Grabe and Stoller (2002) assert that extensive reading is an approach to reading for teaching and studying, in which learners prefer to read a lot of books that come within their linguistic competence. Nation (2009) suggests that extensive reading is an approach where learners concentrate on the context of the text they read and attempt to improve their fluency through materials (as cited in Dao, 2014). Bamford (1984) state that extensive reading should be used in any form of EFL class, regardless of the subject, intensity, age, or level of the student's language. According to Bamford & Day (1998), reading extensively increases students' literacy skills,

develops optimistic attitudes about reading, boosts their enthusiasm for reading, and enhances different aspects of target language proficiency, including vocabulary gain and writing. Lien (2010) also addressed the fact that some scholars have argued that extensive reading is critical to enhancing learners' fluency in the target language as it contributes to a vocabulary acquisition that automatically improves their reading speed. For the successful implementation of ER, Bamford and Day (2002) proposed ten principles as follows:

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.

10. The teacher is a role model of a reader.

(pp. 137–139)

They believe that these principles are the basic ingredients of extensive reading and have encouraged teachers to use them as a way to examine their beliefs about reading in general and extensive reading in particular (Bamford & Day, 2002).

2.2. Interactive fiction

Interactive fiction has been identified in different ways since its first development. Interactive fiction was originally known as a crossword puzzle at battle with a narrative (Nelson, 1995). Pereira (2013) recently define interactive fiction as a potential narrative – the one that is shaped by the player as she or he explores and interacts with the game-world, and it is a series of logical puzzles within this world, which must be overcome in order for the narrative to advance. In other words, interactive fiction is not a linear narrative. The protagonist or player has a choice to make several decisions about their life, which influence how details / scenes play out afterwards in the story. A narrative may also be non-linear where it branches but with fewer means for change than IF games often have. As such, IF is a unique form of non-linear participatory storytelling. IF is sometimes viewed as an expanded form of Choose Your Own Adventure books.

2.3. Interactive fiction in language learning

IF has been used as reading material for its benefits and been studied in different contexts. A vast majority of previous studies found that IF can provide many benefits, one of which is significantly stimulating students' motivation (Haunstetter & Kozdras, 2006; Laurence, 2007; Neville, Shelton & McInnis, 2009; Pereira, 2013). As Krashen (1985) states, one way to motivate and encourage language acquisition is through reading. He asserts that it is "hard work to acquire a second language but it can be enjoyable work. And it is hard work that really pays off" (p.19). Thus, it is important that teachers engage students in reading interactive fiction, which probably stretches

their minds and increases their interest in language. Without a doubt, IF "can be a powerful motivating force" for those who may not have had much experience reading in English or for those who are reluctant readers (Bogost, 2011, p.23). It is necessary to choose texts that will motivate every student and provide an opportunity for them to engage in interaction. Haunstetter and Kozdras (2006) prove that IF could be efficiently used in schools, providing engaging and empowering opportunities for students' learning and literacy development. In their study, they found that IF affords the learner opportunities to devise or choose a path. The student progresses from being a passive learner to an active learner via submersion into personalized learning content. Neville, Shelton and McInnis (2009) conducted a mixed-method study using IF to teach German vocabulary, reading, and culture to university students and reported that IF could help to immerse students into German culture and to increase their vocabulary. They also found that IF helped the students to activate their schema and write the essays more easily than the students of the text-based group. In the same vein, Laurence (2007) suggested that IF can help students develop reading comprehension skills, as well as writing skills by solving problems within the context of the story based on the findings of the study conducted with college students in India. He claimed that IF is useful because it provides students with opportunities to use their own language to respond to what they read and thus will develop their reading skills. The findings support Hargreaves' (2007) claim that IF is "written in such a way as to encourage students to discuss, connect, and play with the text" (p.21). In other words, IF does not simply provide a 'one-way' reading activity but also provides opportunities for interactivity within it. Pereira (2013) conducted a study that used IF as a tool for teaching English to Brazilian-Portuguese teenagers and found that the students enjoyed using IF because it felt like playing a game and at the same time they learned about language structure and vocabulary. Although it's proved to be beneficial to students of ESL in different contexts, using IF in learning English as a foreign language at the tertiary level in Vietnam is limited and underresearched.

3. METHODS

3.1. Research approaches and design

With the research aim of examining the students' attitudes towards the use of interactive fiction in extensive reading, a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches were used. The research instruments consisted of teacher's journals and three questionnaires.
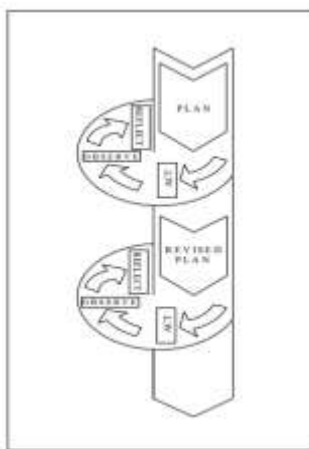

Figure 1. *An illustration of the action research model after Kemmis (cited in Hopkins, 1985)*

Action research was adopted as the research method, which generally involves inquiries into one's own practice through a process of self-monitoring that includes entering a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting on an issue or problem in order to improve practice (Burns, 1999). The framework of typical action research can be illustrated in Figure 1.

In this research, the researcher as a teacher making inquiries into her using IF in her reading class. A four-step cycle was completed upon implementing of the current research on the students' attitudes towards IF used in extensive reading.

3.2. Research participants

To begin with, the major participants of this research were a group of 40 first-year students enrolling themselves in one Reading 2 course at a university in central Vietnam the researcher had no control over the enrolment of the students and therefore, no control of the participants. Second, all student participants were fresh-men with at least 7 years of learning English. Thus, their English is assumed to be at the second level (A2) of English in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Lastly, the teacher herself was also the researcher, who worked as a lecturer in the Faculty of English at the same university.

3.3. Procedure

Table 1. *Procedure of the research*

Stages of research	Aims	Notes
Stage 1. Pre-research	- Identifying and focusing on the problems during reading process - Identifying students' reading habits and their preference in reading in English	- Observing reading process. - Conducting a survey using Questionnaire 1. - Analyzing the data from the Questionnaire 1.
Stage 2. Research implementation	- Conducting each cycle based on the procedure of Action Research: planning, implementing, observing, and reflecting on each phase.	Implementing the action plan in two cycles: Cycle 1: - Introducing IF to students and using two IF books to teach. - Collecting Ss' motivation self-report after each lesson. - Writing and analyzing teacher journal as well as students' motivation self-reports. - Analysing the data to guide the next step. Cycle 2: Based on the data collected from Cycle 1, teacher-researcher adjusted the lesson plans: - Using more than two IF books in class. - Offering Ss more time to read in pairs. - Giving Ss the chance to try reading IF on computer individually in a computer room - Encouraging Ss to read IF at home when learning online due to Covid-19.

		- Asking Ss to develop a reading portfolio including a reading log, book report forms, and story maps. - Writing and analyzing teaching journal as well as students' motivation self-report.

The procedure of the research consists of two main stages, namely pre-research, and research implementation. Before the action research, the pre-research stage was conducted to identify the problems of the students' learning reading process, which depicted the students' low motivation to engage in reading activities, and limited reading abilities. The findings from the pre-research stage guided the next stage of the current research which is research implementation. The stage of research implementation consisted of two cycles, one of which includes four steps: (1) planning the action; (2) implementing the action; (3) observing the action; and (4) reflecting the observation results. The results of the first cycle became the consideration for planning the second cycle. During the research implementation stage, four class meetings were held using IF learning materials for reading in class. The duration of each meeting was 90 minutes, that is two periods. The whole procedure of the research implementation is summarized in Table 1 above.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following sections will examine how the students feel about the use of interactive fiction as extensive reading including their attitudes towards the learning activities in reading class with IF, as well as the way of IF being used as a whole experience, and the possibility of using interactive fiction as extensive reading material outside classroom.

4.1. Students' attitudes towards the learning activities in the reading class with IF

Table 2. *Students' attitudes towards the learning activities with IF*

No.	The activities conducted in the reading class with IF:	Mean	SD
1	arouse my curiosity in searching upcoming details in the fiction / story.	4.60	.393
2	enable me to interact with the content / characters more / engaged in the story more.	3.95	.053
3	set up a clear purpose when I read.	3.58	1.06
4	guide me to read the story easily.	3.90	.085
5	arouse my interest in a reading lesson.	3.88	1.02
6	are easy to follow.	3.85	1.05
7	enable me to relate myself to the story (personalized)	3.58	1.07
8	focus on important language items.	3.6	1.17
9	allow me to interact with my classmates	4.55	.451
10	promote me to be an active learner in the class.	3.85	1.05
Mean of cluster 1		3.93	.074

Note: *On scale from 1-5: 1: Strongly disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neutral; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly agree*

The data from Table 2 indicates that a majority of the student participants perceived interactive fiction to be effective in arousing their curiosity, engagement, and involvement in the reading process (Mean of cluster 1 = 3.93; SD = .074). With the highest Mean score of all (M=4.60), Statement 1 indicated that a large number of the students expressed their strong agreement that

the activities conducted in the reading class with IF aroused their curiosity about discovering upcoming details in the fiction/story. Being asked to explicitly explain further about their IF experience, the students reported in the questionnaire that IF introduced fresh ways for students to communicate with one another, particularly if they had been feeling shy and bored in class. In fact, the students had the opportunity to develop their language skills through interacting with the content/characters more closely (Statement 2, M=3.95). Furthermore, they could relate their own feelings and experiences with these characters (personalized) while reading interactive fiction because it creates a story world that is easy for them to imagine and enter into (Statement 7, M=3.58 with SD =1.07). This finding supports Bogost's (2011) findings that entertaining materials such as short stories and novels with content related to the student's own life or reality can help readers to make connections with their personal experiences or reality, thus motivating them to take part in literary activities such as extensive reading. In addition, the students reported to be able to interpret the context and focus on important language items in the reading (Statement 8, M=3.60 with SD=1.17). What is more, by using a computer to play interactive fiction, students could comprehend a story as a whole and establish a clear objective, enabling them to interact with the story, thus completely involved in constructing their own reality (Statement 3, M=3.58 with SD=1.06). More interestingly, interactive fiction is particularly effective as a source of extensive reading material for those English learners who are likely to fall victims of boredom during their normal English reading classes (Statement 5, M=3.88; Statement 10, M=3.85).

Overall, thanks to interactive fiction, nearly all of the students had been stimulated to be active learners in class, for they could participate in discussions about what happened in the IFs as well as describe their own interpretations of what they read without the fear of being off the topic. In this way, it is easy for them to practice necessary language skills as well as learn how to engage themselves in the activities that help them grow as learners. These findings confirm Kozdras and Haunstetter's (2006) findings in their research that the student who was fascinated and motivated to read extensively would progress from being a passive learner to an active learner via submersion into personalized learning content.

4.2. Students' attitudes towards the use of interactive fiction as a whole experience in the reading class

Below is the table consisting of the findings which reflect the students' attitudes towards the use of IF as a whole experience in the reading class. The students were asked to evaluate their agreement with each statement on a scale ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (5) Strongly agree.

According to the data in Table 3, the majority of the students adopted positive attitudes regarding the plentiful contributions of interactive fiction utilised in the reading class (Mean of cluster 2=4.12). In general, they reported a preference for the enjoyment of interactive fiction over standard plain reading. There were numerous alternative endings for students to explore, which added more curiosity and surprises to the reading experience. What is more, the powerful environmental interface of the interactive fiction (e.g., illustrations and audio description for description and word choices) made the reading experience more realistic and immersive. In other words, as can be seen in Table 4.2, a majority of the students (85%) were not only attracted by the IF visual graphics/pictures on the cover and within the text but also assisted with the visual graphics/pictures in their understanding of the content. It is obvious that these findings support the findings of a number of prior studies indicating that many students learn better with visual aid such as illustrations or pictures of characters involved in activities, thus enabling them to comprehend what they are reading and also assist them to retain it better (Stone & Glock, 1981;

Adeyanju, 1987; Brigman, Cherry, Shabiralyani, 2015). Finally, interactive fiction, with its realistic characters and plot components, proves to help students to draw links with their personal lives or reality (Desiltes, 1999).

Regarding of the IF's non-linear storylines, a large number of the students agreed with the claim that reading IF did not annoy them although they had to make many decisions to reach the good/bad ending of the story reveals that they truly enjoyed making many decisions while reading with the impression that they were living the lives of the characters.

The findings present an overwhelming acceptance by the students of interactive fiction as good reading materials for extensive reading. In fact, they strongly agreed that they became more involved in reading activities when the teacher used IF as extensive reading material in class (Mean score of 4.55). The current study corroborates the findings of the previous research conducted by Nuttall (2000), who found that extensive reading was vital to maintaining the interest in literature among students of all levels. Thus, it can be claimed that the students in my study are not only taught to cope with the enjoyable challenges presented by IF as reading material, but also enjoy reading extensively using IF. Furthermore, most of the students found reading IF as extensive reading materials neither annoying nor frustrating during the semester-long experience, for they can choose what to read mainly for pleasure (Mean score of 3.80). This finding substantiates Day and Bamford's (2002) ten principles for the successful implementation of ER. Of these principles, five are essential, which emphasize the importance of easy reading material as well as its variety, the choice of the learners to decide what they to read, and the relation of the reading to the learners' pleasure, information, and general understanding. Clearly, these five principles are significantly reflected in the use of IF for reading in this action research. The students were able to read a variety of IF stories with different themes and settings, thus challenging their reading skills or increasing interest in reading. If severe or repetitive boredom occurs while reading the same IF stories more than twice, then the students have more choices to read other IF books on different topics that suit their interests.

Table 3. *Students' attitudes towards the IF used in the reading class*

No	Statements	Mean	SD
1	I like the interactive fiction (IF) used in this reading class.	4.28	.701
2	I read the interactive fiction mainly for pleasure.	3.80	1.082
3	I got more involved in reading activities when the teacher used IF as an extensive reading material in class.	4.55	.401
4	IF motivates me to read in English better than a regular reading book does.	3.85	1.153
5	I was intrigued by IF's visual graphics / pictures on the cover and within the text.	3.90	.142
6	The visual graphics/pictures assisted in my understanding of the content in IF.	4.35	.654
7	IF includes various topics of my interests, which motivates me to read in English.	4.23	.771
8	Although the stories in IF are non-linear, reading IF in class did not frustrate me.	3.92	.173
9	I did not find reading IF annoying though I had to make many decisions to reach the good/bad ending of the story.	4.18	1.00
Mean of cluster 2		4.12	.675

Note*: On scale from 1-5: 1: Strongly disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neutral; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly agree*

4.3. Students' attitudes towards the possibility of using interactive fiction as extensive reading material outside classroom

Below is the table consisting of the findings which reflect the students' attitudes towards the possibility of using interactive fiction as extensive reading material outside classroom.

Table 4. *Students' attitudes towards the IF used as extensive reading material*

No	Statement	Mean	SD
1	I could easily find IF on the Internet via IF Database, or IF apps that suits my interest.	3.35	1.23
2	I will try to read more interactive fiction outside classroom after this course.	4.8	.184
3	Using IF as extensive reading material motivates me to maintain the habit of reading in English.	3.85	1.02
4	IF is more suitable to be used as an outside material than as the main material.	4.0	.932
5	I could easily find IF that is suitable for my English level.	3.33	1.16
6	An IF includes pictures, audio and manipulation suiting my learning styles.	4.23	.773
	Mean of cluster 3	4.0	.883

Note: On scale from 1-5: 1: Strongly disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neutral; 4: Agree; 5: Strongly agree

The findings revealed that students' attitudes towards adopting interactive fiction as a source of reading outside the classroom were highly favourable and encouraging (Mean score of cluster 3 = 4.0). In fact, throughout their semester-long experience with IF, most of the students found IF very useful in motivating them to maintain the habit of reading in English after using it as an extensive material (Statement 3, M=3.85, SD=1.02). As a result, it is not surprising that a large percentage of the student participants indicated that they would continue reading IF after the semester, which demonstrates a huge amount of their interest in reading IF outside class (Statement 2 with the highest mean score of 4.8). This certainly confirms the researcher's belief that their interest in reading IF will be consolidated long after the completion of the course. Nevertheless, some of the students expressed mixed feelings about the availability of IF on the Internet that suits their interest and level of English (see Statement 1, Statement 2 in Table 4.3) The students' ambivalent views toward these questions may be attributed to the difficulty in finding IF books and accessing an IF app. Apparently, not all of the students can have facilities and access to the materials they want to read; which caused much inconvenience when the students tried to search for an appropriate book or app to read at home.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings from the current findings revealed that the students had a positive attitude towards reading interactive fiction regarding in-class IF activities, whole experience with IF and extensive reading with IF. The majority of the students claimed that interactive fiction which includes images, sounds, and manipulation, better suits their diverse learning styles. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers who teach EFL consider using interactive fiction as extensive reading material in their English lessons to provide an authentic learning environment while motivating students to read more by engaging them with interesting stories. For students, they should discover suitable interactive fiction and how to exploit them efficiently with or without their teachers' request and assistance.

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