

## **Reading Circles: Triggers for Increased Engagement of EFL Learners in Extensive Reading**

**November 2023 – Volume 27, Number 3**

<https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.27107a2>

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### **Abstract**

While reading circles have been utilized to promote extensive reading in many educational settings, studies on higher levels of reading engagement in under-researched, English-as-a-foreign-language contexts are still in their infancy. Therefore, the current study examines the factors that increase learners' levels of engagement in extensive reading tasks. I used learner diaries to collect data from 60 undergraduate students (ages 19–23) learning English as a foreign language in Mali. The findings suggested that cohesive groups with positive norms, behavioral changes during the task (e.g., investing an exceptional effort to achieve a significant learning goal, such as reading an entire story or a novel), and enjoyment after completing a reading task corresponded with these learners' high engagement levels in extensive reading. Although the findings of this study are specific to one group of language learners, they can still be applied to plan classroom interventions in other EFL contexts to promote learners' reading engagement.

**Keywords:** Extensive reading, reading circles, engagement, enjoyment

### **Background and Rationale for this Study**

During my first reading course with 60 third-year university students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Mali, a francophone country in West Africa, I organized a session of free writing as a diagnostic to uncover what the students wanted to learn in my course, and what the students' past experiences in writing were, which is different from a formal survey to gauge students' needs and interests. Students wrote down anything that came to their minds in relation to their reading experiences and desires. The analysis of their writing pieces revealed that many of them had not read a text that went beyond 30 pages. However, the findings might not have concerned my colleagues because experienced teachers in my context viewed reading

courses as “teaching for fun.” This means that it does not necessitate rigorous preparation in terms of lesson planning, testing, and any English teacher can teach the subjects with this label.

Additionally, reading courses were given to novice teachers or graduate teacher assistants. It is important to note that most of these trainee teachers did not have any prior training in teaching reading. For example, they used, in my opinion, outdated reading materials that did not match the reading skills or needs of the learners, although the reasons for this were many (lack of access to newer materials, prior training with the pre-existing materials, lack of time to update the materials, etc.). On the other hand, a learner may experience a feeling of enjoyment if their skills allow them to deal with the difficulties encountered in the reading material (Arai, 2022). This may explain why these students did not actively participate in the reading courses, and an observation I had from teaching reading without *reading circles* (Le, 2021) previously. I will introduce reading circles and my motivation for implementing them next.

As suggested by Dörnyei (2014) and Dörnyei and Muir (2019), varying teaching materials or activities to create a positive classroom climate is a motivational teaching practice that can be conducive to successful language learning. Considering their suggestion, I implemented *reading circles* to increase Malian EFL learners’ levels of engagement in reading activities and to develop their critical thinking skills. Reading circles are, as explained by Xu (2021), small in-class or out-of-class discussion groups who are assembled and then tasked by the teacher to read the same text. Each group then gets together at least once, and/or multiple times, to share what they have read based on roles that the teacher has assigned them, such as the discussion leader, the note-taker, the person to look up new words for the group (which has been called the “word master” (see Xu, p. 35), which I will discuss later in this paper), or other roles. In class, the teacher can ask questions and provide feedback to the groups as they engage in their reading tasks and discussions. Reading circles can replicate my students’ social milieu and valorize collaboration among peers in the group. Studies on reading circles (e.g., Al-Qahtani & Lin, 2016; Irawati, 2016; Le, 2021; Maher, 2018; Schoonmaker, 2014; Xu, 2021) further demonstrated that reading circles can engage second language learners deeply in extensive reading. Thus, they develop their reading skills, use of new vocabulary, interaction between the members of the circle, and autonomy. However, these studies did not specifically evaluate language learners’ reading engagement in an African English-learning context, and nor did the factors that maintained it. Additionally, the contexts for these studies are different from those of Africa, particularly Mali, where most of the students read only as part of their school activities, and, as a result not for pleasure.

Other studies, such as those by Ho and Lau (2018), Kim et al. (2017), Lee et al. (2021), and Loi and Thanh (2022) examined the relations between classroom environment, reading practice, students’ reading engagement, and reading performance. However, they did not highlight reading circles as strategies to foster reading engagement. Additionally, none of the previous studies on reading circles or reading engagement (i.e., Al-Qahtani & Lin, 2016; Irawati, 2016; Ho & Lau, 2018; Kim et al., 2017; Le, 2021; Lee et al., 2021; Loi & Thanh, 2022; Maher, 2018; Schoonmaker, 2014) were conducted in Africa. A gap in the literature is whether reading circles can trigger increased levels of engagement in extensive reading in an African context. Therefore, the current study examined factors that would increase EFL learners’ levels of engagement in extensive reading in a Malian classroom context to advocate for pedagogical changes, including the uptake of reading circles that can enhance learners’ reading engagement.

## **Review of Literature**

In this section, I review three areas of the literature on the development and teaching of reading in second and foreign language contexts. First, I will review the current theories and hypotheses on how extensive reading can benefit second and foreign language learning. Then, I review the teaching methodology of reading circles, and how and why language teachers have been implementing them. And third, I review notions surrounding foreign and second language learners' engagement levels in classroom-based reading tasks, and how students and teachers can work together in increasing student engagement for better learning outcomes. After I review these three areas, I converge on outlining gaps in the literature that can and should be addressed. And then I provide my current work's research questions.

### **Benefits of Extensive Reading for Second or Foreign Language Learning**

Through extensive reading (ER), reading stops being a receptive skill and becomes a “social practice” (Cowley-Haselden, 2020, p. 6) that brings together a group of learners to understand and discuss the materials that they read. ER can also increase learners' motivational levels and engagement in foreign language learning if practiced regularly over a long time. In this regard, reading a variety of texts exposes learners to real-world situations and increases their knowledge of the world (Renandya & Jacobs, 2002). Also, they gain copious vocabulary, enabling them to use the language for genuine interaction (Shelton-Strong, 2012). Renandya and Jacobs (2016) further highlighted that ER allows second language (L2) learners to have access to knowledge that is beyond their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978; see Shabani et al., 2010, for a review) to improve their reading or listening fluency and comprehension. ZPD not only refers to what L2 learners know, but also to what is beyond their current level that they can reach with help from peers or teachers (Lantolf, 2005). In other words, language learners need others' (i.e., teachers, parents, classmates, or any experts in the field) help to have access to new knowledge.

Similarly, Krashen (1985; 2004) argued that the main goal of ER is twofold: new input and pleasure. For example, ER exposes learners to new knowledge (input) that can be applied in real-world situations. When learners enjoy reading the selected materials, it stimulates a feeling of personal satisfaction (pleasure) that sustains their interest in the L2 (Arai, 2022). In other words, ER is reading for pleasure (Duncan, 2014; Feng & Webb, 2020). But it also has tangible benefits of providing much input that lends itself to implicit and explicit learning of vocabulary and lexico-grammar among other skills (Webb & Chang, 2015), because ER provides for the “repeated occurrence of words [and syntax/grammar] across texts” (Feng & Webb, 2020, p. 501).

Given the benefits associated with ER (e.g., critical thinking, a wide range of vocabulary learning, genuine interaction, enjoyment, and real-world awareness), its practice can increase the autonomy of L2 learners. Learner autonomy is beneficial for the implementation of reading circles because the groups develop beyond the borders of the classroom if their members are autonomous enough to function outside the classroom (Ibrahim & Al-Hoorie, 2019). Thus, they continue the reading circles on their own or at a higher level than initially conceived of by the teacher.

## Research Studies Related to Reading Circles

The names of ER circles have evolved, and specialists tend to choose the terms that better reflect their interests and pedagogical goals. They range from reading circles, literature circles, transactional literary circles, blended reading circles, creative circles, to academic reading circles. What is important is that they all aim to attain some common goals that are pertinent to most of the teaching and learning contexts: improving learners' reading comprehension, encouraging collaboration, interaction, and negotiation between learners and between learners and teachers regardless of the names given to them (Al-Qahtani & Lin, 2016; Maher, 2018). Other objectives involve enhancing learners' writing, listening, speaking fluency, and linguistic knowledge (e.g., grammar and vocabulary) (Renandya & Jacobs, 2016).

Most of the research studies related to ER have emphasized the positive impact of reading on the development of a second or foreign language. Its benefits for L2 learning are so relevant that it is impossible to find drawbacks that can be used to restrict its use. For example, Shelton-Strong (2012) worked with two groups of students aged from 15 to 17 years over 24 weeks to examine the benefits of reading circles for second language acquisition. Data were collected using self- and group evaluation questionnaires and teacher observation during learners' discussion in their circles. The results showed that interactions with peers in the reading circles allowed participants to use the target language and acquire new vocabulary.

A study by Schoonmaker (2014) also explored the benefits that L2 learners could gain from blended reading circles using a different method. The researcher's approach combined face-to-face reading circles with online reading (a website was created for this purpose). In other words, the circles met and worked in both situations. Data were collected using learners' online interactions that were recorded by Wordpress software and notes taken during face-to-face interaction. The results revealed that both methods (i.e., face-to-face reading circles and online reading circles) were beneficial to the learners. In drawing their conclusions, participants were able to set learning goals for future reading. Furthermore, it is a motivational teaching practice that considers learners' choices and the tools (e.g., technology) they value. Notably, giving learners more choices may reduce tension in the classroom, which in turn triggers a higher level of motivation.

Along the same lines, Al-Qahtani and Lin (2016) examined the impact of the creative circle reading teaching approach on the English reading comprehension of 90 Saudi Arabian elementary school students. They were divided into experimental and control groups. The authors had the students in the experimental group participate in 11 creative reading circles during class. While those were being implemented, they collected the participants' reading scores on standardized tests, teacher reflective journals, and learner reflective journals as impact data. The findings revealed that the students before the onset of creative circles were not passionate about reading, and their scores on standardized tests were low overall, but the creative circle reading changed their behaviors. The creative circle reading induced interaction, negotiation, and critical thinking in the classroom, which the teachers positively noted as well. The experimental group also performed better than the control group on the reading comprehension tests, indicating that the creative reading circles had a positive impact on these learners' English reading comprehension.

Irawati (2016) further investigated the effects of literature circles on university English learners' reading comprehension abilities. Irawati used a multiple-choice test composed of 30

items to collect data from two groups of students (i.e., an experimental and a control group composed of 25–30 each). During the reading courses, the literature circles were used with the experimental group, but the control group did not use them. The findings indicated that the members of the experimental group were involved in the reading activities through a critical collaboration, which allowed them to teach one another reading strategies. Consistent with the findings of Al-Qahtani and Lin (2016), Irawati's results also suggested that literature circles promoted positive reflection and enhanced critical thinking.

On the other hand, Le (2021) investigated from a conversational analysis perspective. They collected qualitative data from eight undergraduate and graduate students working in two groups. By analyzing their conversations, Le examined these L2 learners' interactions and how they used their identities (i.e., the role assigned to them in the circle) to manage the tasks related to their learning. The findings revealed that the participants could effectively use their new identity to guide their group to success in the task. They also used various sets of turns to achieve their tasks, with rapid and rich turn-taking being a hallmark of successful interaction that leads to learning and task success (Levinson & Torreira, 2015).

To summarize previous studies on the benefits of reading circles, the authors used questionnaires, reading comprehension test results, and learners' reflective journals (written and oral) to investigate the influences that reading circles have on L2 learners' reading comprehension and interaction. The results indicated that the reading circles fostered comprehension, critical analysis, autonomy, and collaboration between learners. Additionally, they allowed learners to be immersed in the reading and to enjoy it because the task conditions allowed them to fully interact with the reading material (Arai, 2022).

### **Reading Engagement**

Engagement, as a psychological construct, is about devoting oneself to actions and persevering them to achieve an important goal (Koné, 2022). Engaged learners are active students involved in their learning or any other learning activities (Hiver et al., 2021). For example, they devote much of their time, effort, and attention to learning (Dewaele & Li, 2021). Regarding the definition of *reading engagement*, Lee et al. (2021), in a systematic review of 60 empirical studies, found that only 42 % of the authors provided an explicit definition of reading engagement in their studies. For the present study's purpose, I define reading engagement as Lee et al. did, as related to motivation; that is, learners engaged in reading are students who spend longer periods reading large volumes of books or any type of reading materials. In other words, they immerse themselves in the reading material and can experience enjoyment when they achieve their reading goals. When the absorption attains a level that is considered exceptionally high, it can be like *flow* or directed motivational currents (DMCs). DMCs, similar to flow (although flow is when people engage in an activity to get some pleasure from it after they have completed it; see Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), are heightened motivational surges that a learner or group of students can experience (Dörnyei et al., 2016; Ibrahim & Al-Hoorie, 2019). They are characterized by an intensified level of engagement, enjoyment, and exceptional effort investment to achieve a significant goal at any cost (Dörnyei et al., 2016; Muir et al., 2020).

Most of the empirical studies on reading engagement examined the relationships between reading engagement, reading practice, reading performance, and reading comprehension. For instance, Ho and Lau (2018) used data from 4,837 students coming from 151 schools in Hong

Kong to examine the relations between family and classroom environment, students' English reading engagement, and English reading performance. Students and parents' self-reports were also used to explore their research questions more. The findings indicated that a positive classroom environment significantly affected learners' reading enjoyment and performance, while teachers' scaffolding had a positive impact on their reading engagement. In an experimental study, Kim et al. (2017) also evaluated the effect of Strategic Adolescent Reading Intervention (SARI), a supplemental first language (L1) English reading program that intends to strengthen low-achieving students' reading skills. Their sample consisted of 483 students from the USA. The authors assessed reading engagement in relation to behavioral attitudes, participation in the new reading program, and time and efforts dedicated to reading activities. The findings supported the idea that a new instructional reading program, such as SARI, fostered low-achieving adolescents' reading competence and engagement.

In line with this, Kennedy (2018) investigated factors that facilitated children's L1 literacy engagement in a disadvantaged teaching and learning context. Kennedy used questionnaires, observations, and interviews to collect data. The findings indicated reading enjoyment, reading strategies, autonomy, and teacher's support as factors that enhanced these learners' reading engagement. Loi and Thanh (2022), in an experimental study, also examined the effects of a text-driven approach on EFL learners' reading engagement. They used two reading comprehension tests (pretest and posttest) and interviews to collect data from 62 learners divided into control and experimental groups. The findings demonstrated that the experimental group outperformed the control group on the posttest. The text-driven approach was also effective to engage the experimental group in the reading.

Based on the literature (e.g., Ho & Lau, 2018; Kennedy, 2018; Kim et al., 2017; Loi & Thanh, 2022), a higher level of engagement in reading is characterized by the following features described in Table 1.

**Table 1. High-level Reading Engagement Characteristics**

Characteristics	Descriptions
Exceptional production	Learners devote considerable time, effort, and attention to reading materials or any related activities.
Behavioral changes	Learners set routines to attain their reading objectives.
Sustained interest	Learners are interested in reading materials or activities.
Enjoyment	Learners enjoy reading the materials or doing the reading activities.
Task satisfaction	Learners are satisfied with their reading performance because they think that they understand the reading materials.
Task immersion	Learners are totally immersed in the reading materials.

Although the studies reviewed in the three sections of the literature review above contributed to a better understanding of reading engagement and its relationship to reading skills—reading performance, reading comprehension, and reading enjoyment—they did not shed light on the reading circles as a teaching strategy to engage EFL learners in ER in Africa. Neither did they explore the factors that increased learners' levels of engagement when reading circles are used as teaching method in a West African context. The current study, therefore, initiates reading

circles to trigger higher levels of engagement in extensive reading in a West African EFL context. It seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Can reading circles trigger higher levels of reading engagement?
2. What are the factors that increase learners' reading engagement levels?

## **Method**

### **Study Design**

I used a qualitative approach—diary methods (Arndt & Rose, 2023; Rose, 2019)—to design this study. Diaries are a type of field text that researchers can use as raw data to explore and develop a narrative or informative story around an event, like the use of reading circles in a language class (Creswell et al., 2007). Arndt and Rose (2023) also noted that “diary methods in research involve getting participants to record information about themselves, their behaviours, or their thoughts in a written or spoken format” (p. 175). In other words, diary methods allow a researcher to gain insight into learners' learning experiences, including their feelings and engagement, which is not always possible with other data collection instruments (Arndt & Rose, 2023; Rose, 2019). Allwright and Bailey (1991, p. 4) earlier argued that “a learner's diary may reveal aspects of the classroom experience that observation could never have captured, and that no one would have thought of including as questions on a questionnaire.” I, therefore, considered learner diaries to be appropriate to examine the factors that trigger higher levels of engagement in ER.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were third-year university students majoring in communication and business. This was a convenience sample consisting of an intact class of 60 students, 23 females and 37 males. Their ages ranged from 19 to 23 years. Their proficiency level was intermediate (high B1) on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) scale based on an adapted practice paper-based Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) that I administered to them with the help of a colleague. The practice test consisted of three skills (listening, reading, and writing).

It is important to reveal that this study was approved by the ethics committee of the Ecole Normale d'Enseignement Technique et Professionnel. I also obtained my participants' consent before using their entries for my research. Their rights were also respected based on the laws regulating participants' rights in Mali. They could also stop participating in the study without any penalties. I also guaranteed their anonymity by referring to them as P<sub>1</sub> (participant 1) to P<sub>60</sub> (participant 60).

### **Study Context**

In Mali, all university students must learn English as a foreign language from the first to the third or fourth year, regardless of their field. The context of the study was a 45-hour general English course that counts toward learners' final graduation. The course was focused on the reading circle project that lasted 12 weeks, and the class met once a week. Each course lasted three hours with a 30-minute break, and it was divided into three parts: The first part spanned 45 minutes, and the class referred to it as the *general gathering*. During the general gathering, the reading circles were free to stay in the classroom or go out to discuss their readings. The choice was given to ensure each circle could have adequate space and a table for discussions.

The second part was the oral presentation of the reading materials to the class (one hour). Each week, three circles out of 10 presented their discussion orally in English for 20 minutes, going over a series of questions and answers. Learners could invite their friends, relatives, or other faculty members to their presentations. I proceeded that way to give them a real audience. The remaining time (45 minutes) was devoted to the lessons contained in the syllabus (e.g., reading techniques such as scanning, inferring, cultural studies, vocabulary learning, and grammar). I allotted 14 points out of 20 to the reading circle, as described in Table 2. In the Malian educational system, the grades range from 20 to zero, with 20 being the highest score a learner can obtain and zero the lowest.

**Table 2. Description of the Reading Circle Grade**

Criteria	Points Allotted to each Criteria
Participation and Attendance	5
Diary Entries	5
Oral Presentation	6
Lessons Contained in the Syllabus	4
Total Points	20

### Reading Circles

Each reading circle (with 10 reading-circle student groups in total) for the present study consisted of six members (mixed genders) to involve each student in the group work and to enable the teacher (me) to give some attention to all the circles. Additionally, I did not assign students into their circles; they chose their circles on their own during week two of the 12 week project, and negotiated as a group to pick their first roles. However, they switched roles weekly within their reading-circle group to permit each member to play all the roles in the same circle. I proceeded that way so that they could take full ownership of the circles. The roles in the reading circle were adapted from Le (2021), Seburn (2015), Shelton-Strong (2012), and Xu (2021), but the names of certain components were modified to please the learners because they insisted on determining certain roles, as displayed in Table 3. For example, I used “vocabulary person” instead of “word master” (see Xu, 2021, p. 35) in response to learners’ suggestions. They argued that no one could master the words because they change based on context and usage. Each circle chose the reading materials that interested them (e.g., novels and short stories). They switched roles when they finished a material or a portion of a material (such as after the first three chapters in a novel) and changed to a new material or a new section. To adapt these materials to their proficiency skills, but in a way that allowed them to access new knowledge beyond their ZPD, they chose some graded readings (level 6) from the Oxford Bookworms Library (e.g., *Cry Freedom*; Briley, 2009; *The Woman in White*; Collins, 2008).

**Table 3. Structure of the Reading Circle**

Roles	Descriptions
Discussion leader	Asks at least three questions that can stimulate discussion on the reading material among group members.
	Assigns new roles to group members each week.
	Establishes group rules with peers.
	Suggests reading materials, but the group has the final word in decision-making.
	Manages tensions and conflicts inside the circle.
	Drafts a report for the group by using the notes taken by the note-taker.
Theme person	Contacts the teacher for conference purposes.
	Evaluates the group at the end of the reading session by telling their strengths, weaknesses, and goals for future reading.
Theme person	Analyzes the various themes contained in the reading material.
	Gives examples to illustrate each of them.
Note-taker	Summarizes the main parts of the reading.
	Presents the characters and retraces their evolution throughout the reading material.
	Asks three comprehension questions different from the discussion leader's questions.
Vocabulary person	Takes notes of the group discussion for further use.
	Selects new or unknown words and presents them to the group.
Culture person	Explains new or unknown words and uses them in two or three sentences or situations.
	Highlights the cultural aspects and explains how different or similar they are with learners' own culture.
Strategy person	Analyzes how learners can adapt the new culture to their own milieu in case they are interested in doing so.
	Shares the strategies they used to understand the reading materials or increase their reading pace.

### Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

**Learner Diaries.** Another significant part of the reading circle was learners' diary entries written in English at home. The purpose of the learner diaries was twofold: I used them as a teaching instrument and as a data collection tool. Learner diary is defined as a written or oral account of learning experiences (Rose, 2019; Zhao, 2011).

For the present study, students wrote about their reading performance and that of their group peers, including their strengths, weaknesses, involvement in the reading circle, their motivational feelings and emotions, and the conditions that sustained their motivational and emotional experiences once a month. I opted for the monthly reflective entries to ensure that learners have sufficient time to focus on the reading circle and make entries regularly. Learners

made two entries for 120 entries across the 60 learners. However, they were asked to select an entry, to which I responded, although all the entries were read for the present research. Diary entries were graded based on the following criteria: “fully completed,” “partially completed,” and “not completed.” Fully completed means that the learner included all the required elements such as individual and group achievements and motivational feelings. Partially completed means that some elements were missing, and not completed was applied when the writer did not submit an entry. This type of assessment ensures that “... participants have the freedom to record their genuine beliefs and experiences in them, without fear of their ideas being evaluated for assessment” (Arndt & Rose, 2023, p. 6). Additionally, Arndt and Rose argued that diaries are reliable data collection tools if researchers mitigate participants’ desirability bias by increasing ownership of entries and encouraging participants to make entries regularly. I informed the participants that there were no good or bad entries, and that the contents of their entries would not be scrutinized for grammatical or spelling mistakes to increase the reliability of the data collected. It is worth noting that I used learners’ entries for my research after obtaining their consent, and it was also clearly explained that anonymity would be guaranteed.

### **Data Analysis**

I used thematic analysis to analyze the diary-based data. The choice was motivated by Clarke and Braun’s (2017) description of thematic analysis. They explained that it is a flexible approach that helps a researcher gain insight into the data to capture every detail related to the participants’ experiences. Although it is not linear, I used the six-step guidelines suggested by Nimehchisalem (2018). First, I read the data set several times to gain a general understanding of it. Second, I categorized the data according to the key features (e.g., group work dynamics, strategies to achieve reading goals, and emotions) that were present. The third and fourth stages were focused on searching for and reviewing the various features. In the final steps, I identified and reviewed the themes before presenting them as findings. However, it is worth noting that I completed the analysis manually and the entire process was iterative with certain steps repeated while I was at another stage until the themes were finally identified. While I followed the guidelines, the themes emerged and I named them based on the features that previous studies (e.g., Ho & Lau, 2018; Kennedy, 2018; Kim et al., 2017; Loi & Thanh, 2022) used to characterize reading engagement: I found they aligned well. Those characteristics are listed in the literature review section in Table 1. I also shared the data and the findings with a colleague to increase the scientific validity. Based on their suggestions, I changed the theme “group cohesiveness” to “cohesive groups with positive norms.”

### **Results and Discussion**

The current study aims to explore the factors that increase learners’ levels of engagement in ER through reading circles. The findings and their discussion are organized around the three major, larger themes identified after the data analysis: cohesive groups with positive norms, behavioral changes, and enjoyment.

#### **Theme 1: Cohesive Groups with Positive Norms**

The cohesion of a group illustrates the closeness between group members. It is about having a feeling of attachment to the group and referred to as “we” (Chang, 2010; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). It is also one of the main components of group work dynamics that go beyond closeness and describe a genuine and positive climate within the classroom (Beebe & Masterson, 2014; Poupore, 2016). The positive atmosphere inside a group creates a sense of belonging, hence an

increased engagement in group activities and a strong connection between group peers. A cohesive group has a positive impact on learners' level of motivation (Chang, 2010). It also motivates them to change their attitudes to become a legitimate member of the group. It can be concluded that it is a tool of behavioral change (Forsyth, 1999).

During the third week, the groups matured, and then established rules for the functioning of the circles, assigned roles to members, and selected reading materials. As a result, they became more autonomous and cohesive, which caused a significant fluctuation in the participants' level of engagement within the reading circles. They were determined to surpass themselves to remain a legitimate member of the group. For example, they performed their weekly reading assignment, although it was laborious, as P<sub>4</sub> wrote in her entry:

*With my group I was obliged to read the story although it was very long so that I could discuss it with them because the debates were very interesting, and I didn't want to miss them. The group was also present to help everybody to understand the story even if it was long on condition that you read and participate in the work. (P4)*

Additionally, the atmosphere that was reigning over the circles was so positive that learners could not resist it, as revealed in these entries: "... at a certain level, the group motivates you to work hard and then you just follow their rhythm, and you start to like doing it like anybody else." (P7)

*I could finish all my readings although I was slow compared with many in my group, but I think that the most important thing is to accomplish your duty on time and participate in the debate with them. (P10)*

In fact, the group motivational currents encouraged them to engage in their weekly reading as a duty before it became a source of pleasure. The finding is in line with Chang's (2010) study, which found correlations among group cohesiveness, including group norms and learner motivation.

Certain participants also revealed that they enjoyed working in reading circles because the circles allowed them to discuss the reading materials with peers in their groups and use the target language in real-life situations. This finding concurs with Cowley-Haselden's (2020) claim explaining that academic reading is a social practice. It is also in line with the results of a study by Shelton-Strong (2012), which showed that reading circles promoted interaction between learners because they learned new vocabulary from their peers. For example, P<sub>54</sub> noted that "I liked working in the team because we share and we receive from others as this saying goes: The more we share, the more we learn." Once the participants were aware of the power of the group and the benefits that they could gain from their group peers, they became engaged in their reading to please their groups and to achieve the collective goal such as speaking English and gaining new vocabulary:

*I participated actively in the reading circle for many reasons: First, I converse in English with my team. Second, I share my knowledge and learn new things from others. Third, I learn to speak in front of an audience. Finally, it teaches us group work and the negotiations we should do to make our group solid and good. (P1)*

The positive aspects mentioned by a considerable number of the participants should not overshadow the negative attitudes of a few group peers, although they did not hinder the success of the group, as P<sub>51</sub> described in one of her entries:

*At the beginning two students of my circle did not read the weekly story that the chief assigned, and they just came to chat on their phone. However, the discipline imposed by our group leader forced them to change. It can be concluded that they ended up being more involved in the circle discussion because they realized that we could expulse them so that our group could be better. I think that the group changed them to readers, but the question is: Were they reading because they liked reading, or were they reading for the group? In each case, they became readers and that was what we wanted them to do. (P51)*

In this situation, the collective goal attainment pushed the most reluctant students to read despite their demotivation. Also, they may be caught up in the group motivational currents. The finding supports the importance of group leaders as a generating parameter of group-DMCs (Ibrahim & Al-Hoorie, 2019). Additionally, performing a task even if not enjoyable, just for the sake of belonging to a group and achieving the collective goal is one of the characteristics associated with group DMCs.

The group cohesion strengthened the relationship between group members and increased their reading engagement. For example, certain participants explained that they were motivated to read because their group gave them the opportunity to discuss their reading in English, as P<sub>56</sub> commented, "... we supported each other in the practice of English even the ones who had difficulty to speak participated and expressed themselves without fear because we involved them in each aspect of the work." The feeling of belonging to a group that wanted to achieve a learning goal at all costs would have stimulated an obsession with the course and reading circles. Finally, the finding related to group cohesiveness and its positive influence on its members' performance and reading engagement supports one of Ho and Lau's (2018) findings, which indicated that a positive disciplinary climate combined with effective teacher scaffolding were predictors of learners' reading engagement, enjoyment, and performance.

## **Theme 2: Behavioral Changes**

Behavioral changes refer to the routines that a learner establishes to achieve an important learning goal (Dörnyei et al., 2016). At the beginning of the course (first and second weeks), the learners did not attend it regularly despite 5 points out of the total 20 allotted to attendance and participation. For example, most of them left before the end, but I observed a notable change in their behavior in the third week. The class was so crowded that I was obliged to look for more chairs: 50 students out of 60 were present, and none left before the end of the course. One of them explained that he would not only attend courses regularly, but also challenge himself to succeed:

*At the start of the course, I was not very motivated, and I did not come regularly. I did not decide to stay at home on purpose, but I thought that it was another grammar course. I did not know that we would do something else. To be honest, I am for the reading circle and from now on I am in it, and I will impress everybody by my active participation. (P29)*

During the fifth week, all 60 students were regularly attending reading class, and they produced beyond expectation. For example, they successfully formed their groups, assigned roles to each member of the circle, and chose the reading materials. They also submitted their journal entries on the first Monday of the month. I noticed that they were enthusiastic and spent more time on their reading tasks, which is a sign of greater reading engagement (Lee et al., 2021). Their engagement became an obsession, and it was sometimes difficult for me to pay attention to each circle. For example, seven groups out of 10 would ask for a conference with me before their date to make an outstanding presentation. The idea of competitiveness also increased their levels of engagement and triggered a motivational drive that was identical in many ways to group-directed motivational current experiences. As explained in the literature review, group-directed motivational currents (DMCs) are exceptional motivational peaks experienced by a group of learners during intensive project work, such as reading circles (Dörnyei et al., 2016; Ibrahim & Al-Hoorie, 2019; Muir et al., 2020).

Other major behavioral changes that I noticed were the attention and effort the learners gave to the reading circle after five weeks of group work. For instance, they set routines ranging from setting a working schedule, conducting research online, prohibiting telephones to coming on time for the course. These behaviors are regular habits in other teaching and learning contexts, but they are signs of exceptional concentration for these learners:

*My group achievements are magnificent because this is the first time for my friends to devote an incredible [incredible is used to mean considerable] effort to a course, especially reading. We worked day and night, and we only focused on another course if we had a test or a final exam. Reading is the “vedette” [vedette is a French word that means star or famous] course now. (P58)*

Furthermore, several students emphasized the importance of behavioral changes and the pressure that it exerted on the group members to push up their level of engagement to ensure collective success:

*I did not imagine that I would be so courageous and passionate about a simple reading course. With my group, we did research online and read other papers to understand better our reading and dominate our presentation. We worked from 5 o'clock until 7 to prepare our discussion before the class and continued to work during the weekend without any rest to be totally ready. (P60)*

*Our group adopted new rules to succeed in our reading course like being serious when we worked: no telephone, no useless talking or coming late for the group gathering. We were really interested in our story, and we wanted to be the best group during the final presentation. We really read a lot for the course this semester. (P39)*

It is worth noting that the teacher (I) gave constructive feedback to the learners during the various conferences. For example, I appreciated individual and group performance, but poor achievements were also addressed without frustrating the learners who accepted the critics. Consequently, they set routines to improve their performance. These comments are referred to as positive progress checks (Dörnyei et al., 2016). This may explain why the participants were actively engaged in the reading activities. Positive progress checks are necessary so that learners' higher level of engagement can be maintained until they achieve their goal (Dörnyei

et al., 2016). Additionally, they inform the learners that they are on the right track to attain their vision, as P<sub>9</sub> explained in his entry:

*I love the reading circles because I discussed in English with my group, but I was personally honored when Madam recognized my hard work in front of everybody and cited me as an example. This gesture just comforted me in my reading, and I did my best not to disappoint and then reading became easier that way. For instance, I decided to read at least 30 pages a day just to discover new words and stay in touch with English, and not to lose my new rhythm. (P<sub>9</sub>)*

The finding suggesting that teacher's support increases learners' reading engagement is consistent with Kennedy's (2018) results, which found that teachers' support fostered young learners' reading engagement.

### **Theme 3: Enjoyment**

Reading enjoyment is a sensation of pleasure that readers feel when they succeed in becoming immersed in their reading or when they finish reading a material (Arai, 2022; Feng & Webb, 2020). During week 4, the learners stopped viewing reading as a compulsory activity. Therefore, it became a pleasure:

*At the beginning, I was reading just not to be ridiculed in the group because even the bad students were doing their reading. But in the middle of the fourth week, I really enjoyed reading our short story about a shepherd and his daughter. It is at that stage that I can say that I became a reader for joy, and I was not doing it any longer for grades or my friends' critics, although I love good grades because they are the fruit of my hard work and concentration. (P<sub>17</sub>)*

If a reader enjoys reading a book or a novel, it can be concluded that they have understood it, which can be conducive to a higher level of absorption. The exceptional investment in effort and positive emotions that learners described in their entries were triggered by the reading circles. The four skills were also integrated (e.g., speaking activities: discussion in the group and oral presentation), listening, reading, and writing. Each week learners changed roles to give some room to each member of the circle to become the group leader or the note-taker. The role shift increased the learners' interest in the circle and helped them establish routines allowing them to achieve their individual and collective goals, as shown in the entry of P<sub>16</sub>:

*I like all the roles in the circle and the way we changed roles each week to do something different and interesting because we could all become leaders in the circle in order to make a coherent presentation that made everybody proud of the group. Each of us also wanted to surprise the group peers with our performance when we became the boss of the group. You sometimes brought novelties such as presenting your questions with powerpoint and motivate the group to talk with controversial questions that created debates that never finished because we all wanted to have the final word. (P<sub>16</sub>)*

The closer they got to their desired goal, the more satisfied they were with their reading performance. The sense of satisfaction induces enjoyment, which triggers a greater passion for the reading material. This is consistent with the results of a study by Koné (2022) supporting the finding that satisfaction and confidence sustain successful second language learning.

Other reasons suggesting that learners' enjoyment caused a higher level of reading engagement are the attachment to the reading materials and the perception of feasibility. Sak (2019) argued that increased learner engagement times are maintained if teachers choose materials or activities that are relevant to their curiosity. For example, the circles selected the reading materials they were interested in. In case the reading material was difficult or beyond their ZPD, they could change it. However, this does not mean that they only chose easy materials. The option aimed to increase learners' perception of feasibility because they can be absorbed in reading if they know that their skills allow them to accomplish or understand it, as P23 put it:

*Our story was long and difficult, but we could read it carefully and understand it. The group discussion also consolidated our comprehension, and facilitated the reading at home when we were alone. It is that way that I plunged in the story and really appreciated each detail. That period was interesting, and sometimes I didn't want it to terminate because it brings you to the deepest part of the story. (P23)*

The participants used the following words to describe their feelings: "plunged," "appreciated," "interesting," and "deep." These descriptions are in many ways identical to the DMC experiences and flow. The feelings of satisfaction and the intense desire to continue experiencing the exceptional motivational peaks characterize DMCs and sustain them (Ibrahim, 2020), although it may be difficult to claim that the participants' motivational feelings or engagement were exactly DMC experiences. In either case, it can be concluded that the reading circle created a unique sensation of excitement and enthusiasm. It was like a trigger that could no longer stop once it was pressed on, as P<sub>45</sub> and P<sub>57</sub> revealed in their entries:

*I will never forget about the reading circle experiences because they pushed me to read by duty at the beginning, and later I was doing it because I wanted to do it. At that stage, I did not want it to stop, even if it was sometimes challenging. (P45)*

*While reading the story about Mother's Love, I was excited to go till the end of the story because it was becoming more and more interesting, and this made me happy. It was difficult for me to stop even to go somewhere, and I just wanted to finish reading and know what would happen to the different characters. (P57)*

The finding also supports the results of a study by Loi and Thanh (2022), which demonstrated that learners might enjoy reading if their teacher selected reading materials that satisfied their curiosity instead of strictly following the texts provided in the textbooks.

Although a few participants explained that it was sometimes challenging to understand the reading material, a considerable number of them were satisfied with their performance because they always found solutions to the difficulties through their group peers or the teacher:

*I recognized that it was not always easy for me to read like 50 pages in one or two days and understand everything. But I did it with the help of my group with difficult words. The teacher also shared some techniques with me to learn new words without using a dictionary. When I could finish my story, it was like I received a prize, and I was proud and smiling like a child with his new bike. (P34)*

*I am for the reading circles even if it is not always easy to understand long texts when you are alone reading, but I used techniques like inferring from the context to understand some parts. What makes me very determined to finish my reading is that once you understand the difficult part, you want to know the rest, and you are impatient to discover it. (P8)*

The feelings of enthusiasm, pride, and satisfaction supported their reading habits until the end of the reading course. The finding concurs with the results of a study by Ibrahim (2020) that indicated that motivational surges are not supported by goal-orientedness and vision only. Enjoyment in the form of pride and enthusiasm can sustain a learner's higher engagement levels over time.

Although I did not consider new vocabulary acquisition as a theme, the participants reported that a rich repertoire of new vocabulary motivated them to communicate in English with their peers in their group. These results align with the work of Feng and Webb (2020), and Webb and Chang (2015) who explained through their research that ER supports vocabulary acquisition. In other words, learning many novel words exposed these students to knowledge that was beyond their ZPD, which in turn enhanced their confidence while speaking in front of an audience:

*I liked everything about the reading circle project, but I personally like the vocabulary person because I am poor in vocabulary, and I could obtain many words when I was the vocabulary person. When I realized that my word repertoire was very rich, I became more confident during my presentation because I was conscious that I knew many words and I could speak in front of everybody without being complexed or nervous. (P24)*

*The vocabulary person role captivated me because I consider vocabulary as the central system if you want to practice a new language. It is not possible to read, write, or speak without words. So, this aspect was really helpful and necessary during the oral presentation. Moreover, I knew many varieties of words when I was reading the story. This makes me feel more comfortable during my oral presentation because I will not slow down to look for words. (P38)*

The finding is consistent with the results of studies by (Al-Qahtani & Lin, 2016; Shelton-Strong, 2012) that also indicated that reading circles specifically develop learners' linguistic knowledge, such as vocabulary, which motivates them to interact genuinely in the target language.

## **Conclusion**

The present study aimed to examine the situations that favor an increased engagement of EFL learners in extensive reading. The findings indicated that reading circles created a sense of belonging to a group and a feeling of enjoyment and satisfaction that encouraged the participants to set routines to actively read for the collective and personal goal attainment. After a three-week collaboration with group peers and the teacher, reading became a pleasure that they wanted to perpetuate alone after class hours to experience the unique feeling of being immersed in the reading material. Other reasons for the learners' heightened engagement can be explained by the level of difficulty in the reading materials that matched their current skill.

Additionally, they could also access new knowledge that was beyond their current knowledge set but within the ZPD through positive progress checks with their peers and with their teacher.

The findings of the current study suggest that reading circles can be used as intensive project work to trigger an increased level of engagement in extensive reading (ER). However, the teacher must ensure the following conditions so that the circles can trigger successful language learning. First, they must facilitate the development of small groups and assist them until they become cohesive without becoming an influential member because the group must belong to the learners so that they can feel a strong attachment to it. Second, learners should be the decision-makers, that is they should select their own reading materials, or the teacher can provide them with a list of various readings. The goal is for them to make their own choice. Third, learners should record their experiences in a diary, which can take the form of a reflective journal or blog to ensure that the teacher provides them with quality feedback.

Although the findings of the study have contributed to a better understanding of how the learner group cohesion, enjoyment, and investment of exceptional effort can trigger and sustain increased levels of reading engagement in an understudied context, it has some limitations related to learner diaries as a data collection instrument and the convenience sampling technique. For example, participants may have written in their entries what I may have wanted to read. Another limitation of the current study is the absence of interviews. They could give the researcher the opportunity to confirm her findings and mitigate the limitation of learner diaries as a data collection instrument. Importantly, the limitations were minor compared to the insightful data collected from learners' entries. Other studies can use mixed-methods data collection instruments to examine the effects of reading circles on long-term learning.

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## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to be grateful to Prof. Paula Winke, the editor, and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback. I also thank the Alliance for African Partnership for its support.

## **To Cite this Article**

Koné, K. (2023). Reading circles: Triggers for increased engagement of EFL learners in extensive reading. *Teaching English as a Second Language Electronic Journal (TESL-EJ)*, 27 (3). <https://doi.org/10.55593/ej.27107a2>

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