

## **Do Algerian EFL Undergraduate Students Read Enough to Allow Implicit Vocabulary Learning to Take Place?**

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**Abstract:** Based on the premise that reading is an important source of knowledge and linguistic input, the present study hypothesized that Algerian EFL students do not read enough to allow adequate and continuous vocabulary learning to take place which negatively impacts their language proficiency. Therefore, the study endeavoured to scrutinize the reading habits of our students taking as case study Djillali Liabes English Department undergraduate students and using a quantitative approach with a questionnaire as a data collection tool. As expected, the findings uncovered the poor reading habits of our EFL students and pointed to the home as well as the classroom environment as the main agents sharing responsibility for this problematic situation.

**Keywords:** EFL Context, Intensive/Extensive Reading, Reading Comprehension, Reading Habit, Vocabulary Knowledge

### **1. Introduction**

Language learning is based on the development of different competencies, yet it has been demonstrated that the linguistic competence and more particularly vocabulary knowledge is the foundation of these competencies be it in an L1 (Lewis, 1993) or an L2/FL context (Lessard-Clouston, 2013). To this regard, Schmitt (2000) points out that “Lexical knowledge is central to communicative competence and to the acquisition of a second language” (p.55). In an L1 context most of this vocabulary is acquired implicitly through repeated exposure, continues contact and rich experiences with the natural linguistic environment (Yopp et al., 2009). However, in the foreign language context, the case of English in Algeria, contact with the target language is limited to the non-natural formal environment of the classroom where the linguistic input is often not that authentic and the amount of exposure is insufficient to allow continues vocabulary growth.

Hence, researchers consider reading, especially extensive reading, an important alternative to remedy and compensate the lack of contact with the foreign language (Davis, 1995; De’Ath, 2001). Reading is considered essentially important for developing learners’ vocabulary knowledge (Karimpour et al., 2016). Based on her own experience, the famous polyglot Kato Lomb (2011) highlights the significance of reading in foreign language learning stating that “It is only books that provide an unlimited amount of repetition. It is only reading that can be returned to again and again without being an ordeal” (p. 92).

Hence, the importance of reading stems from the fact that it can provide the learner with authentic input and can ensure multiple exposures needed for vocabulary learning.

In view of that we believe that, in addition to the lack of exposure to the English language, Algerian EFL undergraduate students are disengaged from reading which deprives them from a valuable opportunity to expand their vocabulary and enhance their English. Besides, we assume that our students have developed inadequate reading habits as a result of the poor quality of reading instruction during pre-university education which seems to continue at the university level. This situation seems aggravated by another key factor which is the lack of parental support. Thus, the study endeavours to address these assumptions in an attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What type of readers are Algerian EFL undergraduate students?
2. Does the home environment help them develop good reading habits?
3. Does the university classroom environment help them develop good reading habits?
4. Do our students read enough to allow vocabulary learning to take place?

## **2. Review of Literature**

Reading is not only a basic learning skill but it is an indispensable life skill. It plays a prominent role in the learning of foreign languages. It brings the foreign language to the learner and provides them with authentic examples about different aspects of the target language. Hence, through reading foreign language learners have the opportunity to “get more immersed in language” (Stevie, 2015, p. 2) and this may be because “A book paints a picture that an instructor never can” (p. 2) particularly when the instructors are themselves non-native speakers of the language.

### **2.1 Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary Knowledge**

Reading is a multifaceted activity that involves the synchronization of a number of interconnected processes identified by Joshi (2004) as “biological, psychological and cultural” (p.29). Acknowledging the complexity of reading, the US National Academy of Education likens reading to “the performance of a symphony orchestra” (cited in Anderson et al., 1985, p.7). It is an interactive process between the reader and the text which is supposed to result in the readers’ understanding and interpretation of the latter. Pointing to comprehension as a prerequisite outcome of reading, Joshi (2004) states that “reading without comprehension may be barking at print” (p.29) also he argues that this comprehension is highly based on the readers’ vocabulary knowledge.

Therefore, if the reader does not comprehend much of the vocabulary in a text, that is the smallest units that carry meaning, he/she is likely to fail in getting the general meaning of the text. Hence, Hay et al. (1998) argue that “word recognition is an essential component in the mastery of reading” (p.222). Learners may use different reading strategies to infer the meaning of a text, yet the best and most useful strategy is definitely to possess a rich vocabulary because it enables them “to read with less effort ... and result in better performance on comprehension tests” (Roch et al., 2013, p.135). Thus, the correlation between vocabulary and comprehension made it necessary to investigate the lexical coverage; that is the amount or percentage of familiar vocabulary in a text needed to make comprehension possible.

The studies conducted in this field led to varying estimates that range from 95% as the minimal lexical

coverage threshold (Laufer et al, 2010, p.18) which allows *acceptable* comprehension , to 98% (Hu et al, 2000, p.422) as the optimal threshold coverage that leads to *successful* or *unassisted* comprehension. Laufer et al (2010) estimate the acceptable 95% coverage to about 4,000-5,000 word families and the successful 98% coverage to 8,000-9,000 word families. Nation (2006) differentiates between listening and reading comprehension and claims that while a vocabulary of 6,000-7,000 is needed for the comprehension of spoken texts such as children's movies and unscripted spoken English, about 8,000-9,000 word families are required for comprehension of reading texts such as novels and newspapers.

## 2.2 Reading and Vocabulary Learning

The first years of schooling starts by helping students become literate, i.e. learn to read and write and once this is achieved, reading and writing are in turn used as skills to broaden students' knowledge in a variety of teaching subjects. Reading is as described by Grauberg (1997) "the gateway to literacy" (p.192). In fact, there is a mutual relationship between reading and learning in general and vocabulary learning in particular mainly when it starts at an early age. Sullivan (2014) discovered that the vocabulary knowledge of an individual aged 40 is based on how much he/she reads during his teenage life. She clarifies this point stating that:

Reading for pleasure as a child appeared to exert a long-term positive influence of vocabulary development up to the age of 42. In addition, those who continued to read for pleasure frequently at the age of 42 experienced larger vocabulary gains between adolescence and mid-life than those who did not read. (Sullivan, 2014)

Horst (2004) explains the vocabulary gains that result from reading as opposed to listening by the fact that written texts comprise larger amounts of lexis than spoken ones and thus they provide the learner with a rich input in the target language. Nevertheless, for reading to allow vocabulary learning to take place, Matsuoka et al. (2010) claim that it must provide opportunities for multiple encounters with the vocabulary item. Though, there is no consensus on the number of repetitions needed to learn a word, researchers agree on repetition as a precondition for vocabulary learning. So, while Vidal (2011) (cited in Nation, 2014) recorded vocabulary gains after only two and three repetitions, Nation (2014) considers twelve repetitions as a reasonable amount for word retention.

So, to learn the 9,000 word families required for unassisted reading, EFL learners need to meet these items 12 times and to reach this amount of encounters. Nation (2014) argues that learners have to read about 25 novels and to achieve this objective he states that they need to read more than one hour per day during five days each week, for forty weeks of the year. Commenting on Nation's findings, McMillan (2016) claims that "At one hour per day, this represents a little over three years of reading, very doable for a motivated adult or adolescent acquirer" (p.65). But, while the importance of reading is recognized in foreign language learning, Grabe et al. (2002) reckon that "Most L2 readers are simply not exposed to enough L2 print (through reading) to develop fluent processing... nor do they have enough exposure to build a large recognition vocabulary" (p. 50). In other words, foreign language (FL) learners are deprived from the benefits of a reading programme.

### **2.3 Extensive vs. Intensive Reading**

Researchers identify two distinctive processes of reading namely intensive reading (IR) and extensive reading (ER) (McLeod, 2013) and the difference between them may be well understood by determining the characteristics of each process. Hence, McLeod argues that IR can be perceived as narrow reading which zooms in on short texts with the objective to decipher in-depth information about their surface structure including but not limited to grammar, discourse markers, key vocabulary, etc. IR often takes place in classroom under the supervision of the teacher who decides about the texts and the follow-up activities and aims at supporting the students “understanding the text and learning language features through a deliberate focus on these items” (Nation, 2004, p.20). As such, IR is used as a means to an end. In other words, the thorough involvement and deep engagement of the students with short passages provide opportunities to fully comprehend the passage and its characteristics which is expected to result in the learning of linguistic as well as reading skills.

ER on the other hand relies on the reading of long and large quantities of texts. Students are also expected to gain information and achieve understanding; however the focus is ultimately on pleasure and enjoyment (McLeod, 2013). Students do not look for specific details, they rather target general comprehension. More importantly, McLeod states that they are given the freedom to choose the texts/books and are not required to perform any follow-up activity. This is believed to provide a relaxed environment that enables students to truly enjoy reading (Stanley, 2005). Reading in this case is the means and the end at the same time; it is “its own reward” (Day & Bamford, 1998, p.7). Besides, ER can be practised in and out of the classroom (ibid) which allows language learning to continue beyond the educational setting. Though, ER emerged as a substitute for IR (Stanley, 2005), it stands to reason that a combination of the two processes would be more beneficial to FL learners and would lead to better results than either approach alone.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Setting and Participants**

The current research was carried at Djillali Liabes English Department (DLED) of Sidi Bel Abbes during the academic year 2018-19. Sixty two students preparing a Bachelor’s Degree in EFL at DLED participated in this study. They constituted two groups with 31 participants representing first year (1L) and a similar number representing third year (3L). The objective behind this selection was twofold; first to investigate the reading habits of 1L and try to uncover their entry profile which is believed to reflect the role of pre-university education in building students’ reading habits and second to check whether students’ progression in studies has any effect on their reading habits.

### **3.2 The Questionnaire**

The study was conducted in the form of a survey with data being gathered via a questionnaire which was adapted from two pre-existing questionnaires namely Shafi and Loan (2011) and Ho (2016). Researchers explain that the use of pre-existing questionnaire can be advantageous provided that the users make the necessary adaptations to fit the situation under study (Artino et al., 2014). Thus, the adapted questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section, entitled *about you and your family* tackled

common questions including participants' age, gender, and academic level. Besides, it included five questions meant to discover the role of the parents in building students' reading habits. Under the title *About your reading attitude and habits*, the second section with sixteen questions, tried to depict the attitude of the participants towards reading and the way they approach reading mainly with relation to EFL learning.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

##### 4.1 Section One

The analysis of the data collected from this section revealed that participants' age ranged from 17 to 33 years old and the percentage of females (67%) was larger than males (33%) for both 1L and 3L. Moving to the question about the educational level of the participants' parents, the findings varied between fathers and mothers as shown in figure 1.

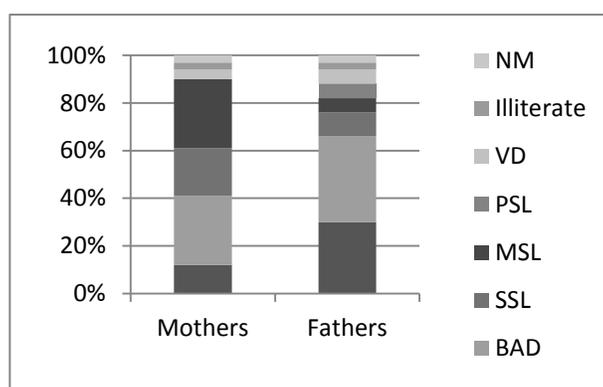


Figure 1: Participants' parental education level

It is clear from the above figure that fathers/males tend to complete their graduate and post-graduate studies more than mothers/females. While 36% of fathers possessed a post-graduate degree (PGD) and 30% a Bachelor's degree (BD) only 12% of mothers completed their post-graduation and 29% achieved their graduation. In contrast, while 20% of mothers had a secondary school level (SSL) and 29% had a middle school level (MSL), only 10% of fathers possessed a SSL and 6% had a MSL. 4% of mothers and 6% of fathers had a vocational degree (VD). Primary school level (PSL) was not selected, 3% of the participants reported that their parents were illiterate and 3% did not mention (NM) their parental educational level. All in all, the educational level of the parents seems more or less satisfactory and may reflect the growing literacy rate among Algerian parents which is believed to be in favour of promoting children's education.

The participants were also asked about their parents' reading habits, 7% reported that their parents never read, 41% stated that their parents rarely read, 18% sometimes read, 11% often read and 23% always read. So, if we consider never, rarely and sometimes as negative answers and often and always positive answers, then only 34% are good readers while 66% of the parents have poor reading habits. Stephens (2007) claims that "children, in general do tend to grow up to be a lot like their parents", so if parents were poor readers, children are expected to be poor readers too. Conversely, the following question

showed that more than half of the parents (53%) always encourage their children to read, 12% often encourage, 24% sometimes encourage, 0% rarely encourage and 12% never encourage them to read. This means that the majority of parents (65%) do urge their children to read in spite the fact that they were identified as poor readers.

Unfortunately, when parents do not serve as models for their children either because they are illiterate or they cannot afford the books, or simply because they are themselves unmotivated to read, children are more likely to grow up with a lackadaisical attitude towards reading (Lindsey, 2016). Stephens (2007) asserts the significance of parents' role modeling and highlights children's sensitivity towards it stating that "kids respect adults who walk their talk. Children are sensitive and astute with a uncanny ability to distinguish between adults who only talk a good game and those who play the game by the rules they preach" (p.2). Hence, the negative attitude of many people towards reading develops usually in their childhood and persists in their adulthood, and many struggle to overturn it which perpetuates a vicious circle that becomes difficult to break over time.

The scarcity of books in our houses as pointed out by the participants in the following question also reflects the failure of the home environment to motivate children to read. 59% of the participants reported that they possessed *only little* books at home, 36% chose the option *some books* and only 5% selected *a lot of books*. The findings also revealed that the books were mainly in Arabic (60%), and very few were in French (55%) with a much fewer number (10%) in English. Overall, there seems to be some evidence in this study which enables us to answer the second research question. That is the home environment does not help students to develop good reading habits.

#### 4.2 Section Two

Unlike section one this section presents data about 1L and 3L separately. It opened with a question enquiring about the participants' own evaluation of their reading habits. So, the findings revealed that 6% of 1L consider themselves excellent readers, 41% above average readers, 29% below average readers and 22% consider themselves poor average readers. 2% of the participants skipped this question as seen in figure 2.

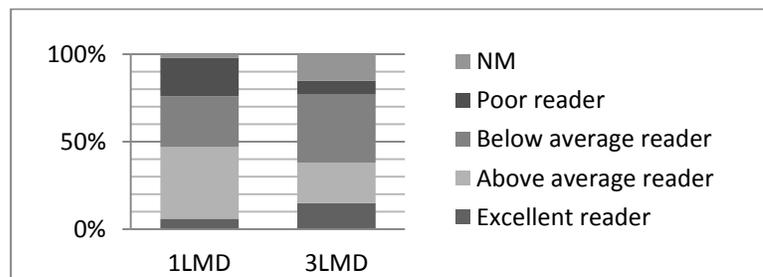


Figure 2: Participants' Evaluation of their Reading Habits

As for 3L, the percentage of poor readers decreased (8%) while the percentage of below average readers increased (39%). Similarly, the percentage of above average readers decreased (23%) and increased in favour of excellent readers (15%) and 15% of the participants skipped this question. So, based on participants' own evaluation, there is a slight increase in the number of excellent readers in 3L (15%) compared to 1L (6%). Still, the majority of 1L (51%) and 3L (47%) recognize that their reading habits are unsatisfactory.

Paradoxically, findings from question two showed that a substantial number of the participants considered reading their favourite activity with 74% for 1L and 65% for 3L. Besides, 55% of 1L and 68% of 3L claimed that they spend a lot of their spare time reading. They even claimed that they get a lot of enjoyment from reading with 81% for 1L and 68% for 3L. Furthermore, 1L seems more motivated by reading than 3L. However, 45% of 1L declared that they get upset when they are required to read, 45% reported that they feel bored and a similar percentage feel anxious when reading, see Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' attitudes towards reading

	Agree		Disagree	
	1L	3L	1L	3L
Reading is my favourite activity	23(74%)	20(65%)	08(26%)	11(35%)
I spend a lot of my spare time reading	17(55%)	21(68%)	14(45%)	10(32%)
I get upset when I think about having to read	13(42%)	08(26%)	18(58%)	23(74%)
when I read I usually feel bored	14(45%)	12(39%)	17(55%)	19(61%)
I often get anxious when I have a lot of reading to do	14(45%)	17(55%)	17(55%)	14(45%)
I read when I am required to do so	16(52%)	15(48%)	15(48%)	16(52%)
I am too busy to read	16(52%)	19(61%)	15(48%)	12(39%)
I get a lot of enjoyment from reading	25(81%)	21(68%)	06(19%)	10(32%)

As for 3L only 39% expressed their boredom when reading, 26% declared that they feel upset when they think about reading, yet a great percentage (45%) expressed their anxiety when they have a lot of reading. 52% of 1L reported that they are too busy to read and a similar percentage declared that they read when they are required to do. This varied slightly with 3L as 48% declared that they read when required to and 68% mentioned that they are too busy to read. Apparently, there is little consistency in the findings of this question mainly regarding 3L answers and the possible interpretation we can provide is that the question deals with students' attitudes and attitudes as described by Cherry (2018) "are often positive or negative, but they can also be uncertain at times". Hence, further research concerning this issue may be suggested.

Question three tackled the languages in which participants read. The data showed that most 1L participants read in English and Arabic with 36% followed by English only with 29%, whereas it was the opposite for 3L with 38% reading in English only and 31% reading in English and Arabic. Then come Arabic, English and French with 18% for 1L and 15% for 3L, Arabic only with 10% for 1L and 5% for 3L and French only with 5% for both 1L and 3L. Participants were given the possibility to mention other languages, and 2% of 1L and 4% of 3L reported reading in English and Tamazight while 2% of 3L mentioned reading in English and Spanish (see Figure 3)

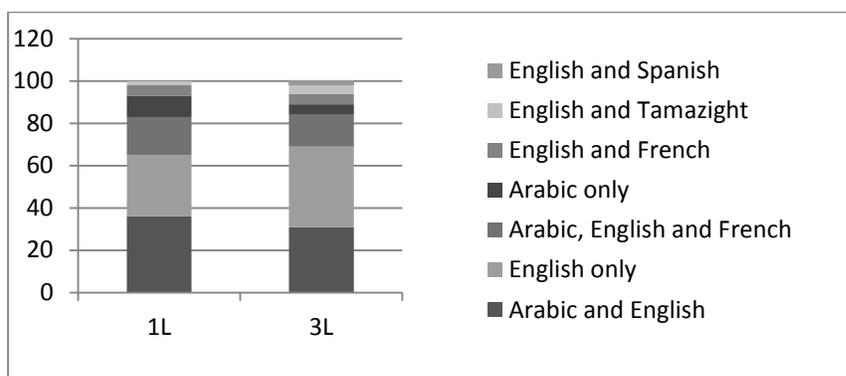


Figure 3: Preferred language for reading

Clearly, the preferred languages for reading are Arabic, the participants' first language and English being the language of studies. As for the preferred place for reading, both 1L (93%) and 3L (76%) chose home as place number one for reading, followed by university library with 10% for 1L and 23% for 3L and only 6% of 1L selected public library while no one from 3L opted for this place.

The next two questions addressed participants' motives behind reading and the amount of time spent on reading. Participants were allowed to choose more than one option. Surprisingly, the findings revealed that most participants, i.e. 90% of 1L and 77% of 3L read for information, while education was their second motive with 61% and 69% for 3L and last they read for leisure and enjoyment with 11% for 1L and 18% for 3L. As for the second question, the majority of 1L (65%) and 3L (69%) reported that they spend less than one hour on reading and 16% of 1L and 8% stated that they seldom read. Only 19% of 1L and 23% of 3L said that they read from one to three hours. These findings apparently contradict what the participants mentioned previously as the majority stated that they spend most of their spare time reading and that reading is their favourite activity.

Question seven investigated the reading material of the participants and the findings showed that the most read material is the websites with 64% for 1L and 76% of 3L, followed by teachers' handouts for 1L with 55% and academic books for 3L with 46%. Novels and short stories were mentioned as the third preferred material for both 1L (15%) and 3L (21%). The difference concerning 3L and 1L in terms of reading material seems logical since 3L receives less handouts from their teachers and are expected to make more research for their oral presentations. The following question was about the number of books read in year 2018. Again there was a clear difference between the answers of 1L and 3L as illustrated in Figure 4.

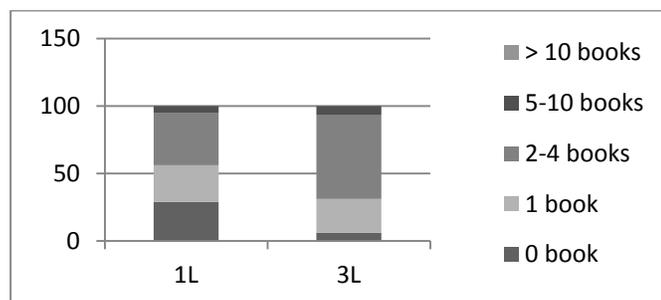


Figure 4: Number of English Books read by participants in 2018

It is clear from figure 4 that the majority of both 3L (62%) and 1L (32%) read from 2 to 4 books, yet the percentage of 3L is nearly twice that of 1L. Besides, while only 6% of 3L said that they did not read any books, 29% of 1L opted for this answer, which may be understood as an enhancement in 3L reading habits.

Based on Nation's findings (2014) and McMillan's estimation (2016) which were mentioned previously, to learn the 9,000 word families our students have to read 25 novels/books over the three years of their graduation studies which would make on average eight novels/books per year. However, the findings revealed that the majority of our students read practically half this amount while a few number read from 5 to 10 (5% 1L, 7% 3L) and the rest of the participant either read one book or did not read at all. So, in view of what has been mentioned so far the participants can be identified as poor readers as an answer to the first research question and this is in spite of the progress noted in the reading habits of 3L. Besides, we can state that our students do not read enough to bridge the gap in their vocabulary knowledge and this is clearly reflected in their poor language proficiency.

Students' reluctance towards reading in fact reflects the actual value of reading in the Algerian society. It is commonly believed that Arabs do not read compared with the Western countries (Lindsey, 2016). Unfortunately, this is not a mere belief but the plain truth and Algeria is no exception. Even worse, reading seems in a continuous regression among Algerian students as pointed out by Toulgui (2017) who states that "Today nostalgia for reading haunts the Algerian university. We even witness a tragic split between the book and its reader that is caused by an endless degradation of their intimate/friendly relationship" (p.14). If printed books are losing their place among the young generations in favour of ebooks and the digital devices, this does not justify their disengagement from reading.

The study also tried to find out if students were given reading assignments in the different teaching subjects and if there were any follow-up activity to those assignments. All of 1L and 3L claimed that they were given reading assignments in two subjects namely Literature and Cultural Studies. But, while the majority of 1L (80%) stated that they were seldom tested, the majority of 3L (83%) said that they were often tested on those assignments.

As a follow-up question, the participants were asked if they practised intensive reading (IR) in class and if their Department afforded them any extensive reading programme. Participants' answers were all negative which revealed the total absence of such programmes in DLED. This finding is also confirmed by the researcher being herself a teacher at the Department. As such, the classroom environment like the home environment appears to be below expectations in terms of fostering students' reading habits which answers the third research question.

This is further confirmed by the next question which was meant to find out if students know how to read effectively based on their own evaluation. 29% of 1L and 13% of 3L answered no, not at all, 25% of 1L and 47% said yes, to a little extent, 45% of 1L and 40% of 3L yes, to some extent, but no one chose yes, to a great extent. Question fourteen reinforced these findings as participants were asked if their reading habits improved after they joined the university. The findings were negative as 45% of 1L and 39% of 3L believed that their reading habits improved to a little extent. 26% of 1L and 36% of 3L said that their reading habits did not improve at all, whereas 26% of 1L and 19% opted for to some extent and only 10% of 1L which reflects the limited reading skills of the participants and their need for more instruction. In this respect, Hermida (2009) points out that most teachers at the university level tend to

assume that all students have already acquired reading skills as part of their pre-university education and as a result students do not receive adequate instruction about reading and end up by “taking a surface approach to reading”. This means that what students have learned before university is insufficient to meet the requirements of university studies.

The last question intended to discover whether the participants were aware of the causal relationship between their reading habits and their vocabulary knowledge and language proficiency. The majority of 1L (39%) believed that they actually do not read enough to improve their vocabulary and language proficiency, 26% reported to a little extent, and 29% to some extent. Whereas, only 6% believed that they read enough to achieve vocabulary learning. Concerning 3L, the majority (45%) chose to a little extent, 26% selected not at all and 19% mentioned to some extent, whereas 10% seemed satisfied with the contribution of their reading habits to the improvement of their linguistic competence.

## 5. Conclusion

This study scrutinized the reading habits of EFL undergraduate students at DLED with the objective to find out whether they read enough to enhance their vocabulary and language learning. The study focused also on the home and classroom as the main agents that usually play a role in nurturing the reading habits of students. What was a common belief has been confirmed in this study; that is the findings revealed that the participants were indeed poor readers though they had positive attitude towards reading. Though students share responsibility for this situation the study showed that students' disengagement from reading was caused partly because of the negative role of the parents and the absence of effective reading programme at the university level where students' achievement is highly based on reading. It has also been noted that the reading habits of student in the third year improved, yet the progress was unsatisfactory.

Because it is an important life and learning skill, reading should be integrated in the university curricula particularly to foreign language courses. It stands to reason that EFL courses in Algeria implement intensive and extensive reading as key approaches to build students' reading habits since the classroom is the appropriate place where EFL students are expected to receive support for learning this foreign language. Hence, suggestion for further research would be to conduct studies that develop and design an extensive/intensive reading programme that benefits from pre-existing programmes and take into consideration the specificities of the Algerian EFL context.

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