

# A REFLECTION ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE ENJOYMENT DURING VOCABULARY LEARNING WITH ACTIVELY LEARN IN A LOW-ANXIETY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT



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## Abstract

Research on effective vocabulary learning has been vastly related to the enforcement of extensive reading in or outside the class. Somehow, the idea of bringing extensive reading to Indonesian EFL context seems like quite a challenge considering the literacy level of the country. This research focuses on the reflection on foreign language enjoyment students' experience during vocabulary learning through extensive reading in Actively Learn which was done a low-anxiety learning environment. The data were taken from 43 freshmen's and the teacher's written reflections during and after 8-week meetings. The data were analyzed using semantic-deductive thematic analysis. The results show that students struggled at first due to reading long texts, but later they enjoyed the learning process and reading materials due to 1) enjoyable and fun atmosphere, 2) getting lots of knowledge about phrasal verbs, collocations, and idioms, 3) mistakes being tolerated as part of learning process, 4) variations of activities, and 5) meanings of difficult words are discussed and described in gestures and depictions.

**Keywords:** foreign language learning, vocabulary, web-based extensive reading

## Abstrak

Penelitian tentang pembelajaran kosa kata yang efektif sangat terkait dengan penegakan membaca ekstensif di dalam atau di luar kelas. Entah bagaimana, gagasan untuk membawa bacaan ekstensif ke dalam konteks EFL Indonesia tampaknya cukup menantang mengingat tingkat literasi negara tersebut. Penelitian ini berfokus pada refleksi pengalaman siswa dalam kenyamanan pembelajaran bahasa asing selama pembelajaran kosakata melalui membaca ekstensif dalam Pembelajaran Aktif yang dilakukan dalam lingkungan belajar dengan tingkat kecemasan rendah. Data diambil dari 43 refleksi tertulis mahasiswa baru dan guru selama dan setelah pertemuan 8 minggu. Data dianalisis dengan menggunakan analisis tematik semantik-deduktif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa mengalami kesulitan pada awalnya karena membaca teks yang panjang, tetapi kemudian mereka menikmati proses pembelajaran dan bahan bacaan karena 1) suasana yang menyenangkan, 2) mendapatkan banyak pengetahuan tentang phrasal verbs, collocations, dan idioms, 3) kesalahan ditoleransi sebagai bagian dari proses pembelajaran, 4) variasi kegiatan, dan 5) makna kata-kata sulit dibahas dan dijelaskan dalam gerakan dan penggambaran.

**Kata Kunci:** pembelajaran bahasa asing, kosakata, membaca ekstensif berbasis web

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## INTRODUCTION

A number of studies with various results attempts at exploring how foreign language vocabulary should be learnt. It is generally acknowledged that a significant amount of second language vocabulary is picked up incidentally through extensive reading (Huckin & Coady, 1999; Kweon & Kim, 2008; Liu & Zhang, 2018; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006). Huckin and Coady (1999) further explain that incidental vocabulary acquisition refers to the “by-product” of extensive reading. In other words, when one exposes himself to reading for pleasure in L2, incidental vocabulary acquisition will most likely happen as the result of his reading activity. Kweon and Kim (2008) did an extensive investigation as to how much vocabulary is incidental acquired from an average of 4 – 6 hours extensive reading for 5 weeks of 3 teen novels indicating authentic written texts. The results show that the participants gained as much as 40% vocabulary out of the over 100,000 words novels. Nevertheless, in their research the students were told not to over attentively concern themselves with the vocabulary unless it interfered them when trying understand the content.

On the other hand, Ellis (1995) points out that acquisition of the pattern or mechanism of spoken or written word forms involves implicit learning processes, which can be done through extensive reading (or extensive listening). In contrast, better acquisition of word meanings needs explicit learning processes with semantic elaboration and imagery mediation. This implies that during the extensive reading, students should be given time to read by themselves to process the content of the written texts in order for them to absorb patterns of language such as spelling or grammatical rules, and later discuss meanings of word explicitly through the previously mentioned conditions to help the brain retain the vocabulary longer and avoid vocabulary decay as mentioned by Brown, Waring, and Donkaewbua (2008).

To prevent that from happening, extensive reading to retain vocabulary acquisition should be done optimally to succeed. To do that first we need to understand the context in which this research was administered. This research was done in Indonesia, in which English serves as a foreign language and it was common that students are struggling with it. Before implementing extensive reading in class, there was a need to consider the possibility in which the students might fail in completing all the assigned reading texts, especially when it involves reading outside the class hours. This consideration was based on the survey data from April 2014 to March 2015 taken by OECD on adults' proficiency level in literacy. The survey involved 36 countries, and results show that Indonesia was in the bottom line.

This situation issued a warning on the likeliness of participants in this research finishing all the texts assigned for the extensive reading due to boredom, lack of motivation in reading, or difficulties in comprehending complicated words or expressions. These conditions could lead to pressure in reading which would negate the point of extensive reading, which is reading for entertainment. Consequently, a different approach needed to be taken.

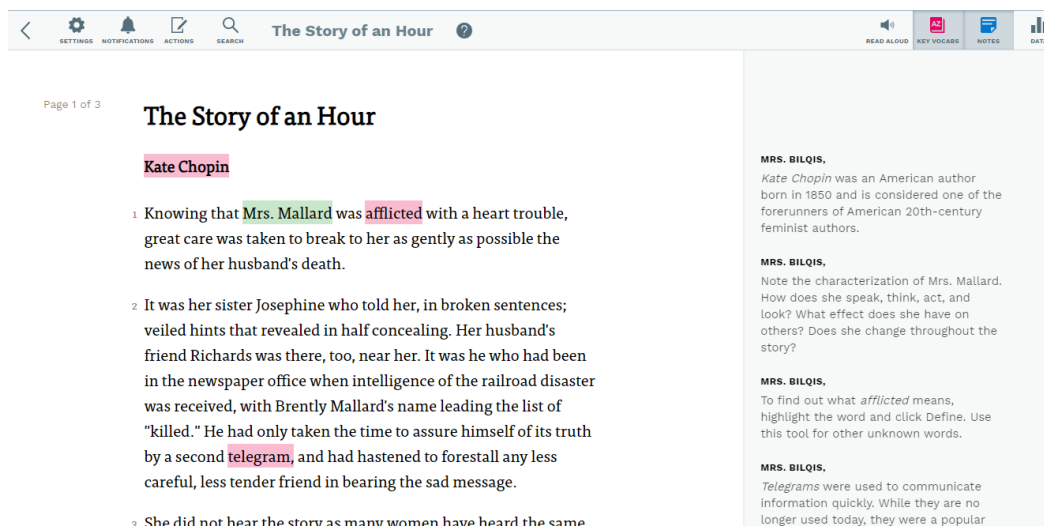
To provide an ideal environment for the administration of extensive reading, class atmosphere should be comfortable and enjoyable for learning which would fit the depiction of a low-anxiety class. Zheng (2021) summarizes the findings of several research concerning the correlation between foreign language anxiety and foreign language enjoyment. She highlights

these two concepts to possess fairly negative correlation. Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2016) research which postulates that the two foreign language enjoyment factors i.e. social and private are connected to peer recognition and teacher recognition for the social factor and to individual realization of progress and authentic use of foreign language for the private factor. This implies that students experience foreign language enjoyment when they build a sense of camaraderie with their peers and maintain a close connection to the teacher. This is in line with Pan and Zhang (2021) who state that foreign language enjoyment is significantly correlated to learning efforts (motivation). Further, they point out that anxiety is negatively correlated with motivation. Their findings imply that students experienced higher level of foreign language enjoyment when there was a good class atmosphere, suggesting that a welcoming environment with cordial classmates and teachers could alleviate anxiety.

Young (1991) suggest some ways to maintain low-anxiety classroom atmosphere ranging from 1) giving students positive reinforcement, 2) helping them develop more realistic learning goals, 3) having teachers with good sense of humor, friendly, relaxed, and patient with whom students feel comfortable and encouraged to speak, 4) emphasizing that mistakes are part of language learning process, 5) not giving harsh error correction, 6) doing group-based activities, 7) making the message interesting so that students actually forget that it is in another language, and 8) doing games or other fun activities. In this research, the teacher implemented various strategies to maintain a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere such as providing positive reinforcement, creating a sense of comfort in the classroom by displaying good vibes, kindness, and throwing some jokes, and also ensuring students that making mistakes was acceptable since it was a part of the learning process. However, rules about their responsibility in reading the story every week were enforced so that students adhered to them and manage to finish the readings they had to do by the end of the semester. Students need to understand that they are completely safe in class unless when rules are broken.

In this research, the Actively Learn web platform was used as a tool to facilitate extensive reading and vocabulary acquisition in a low-anxiety classroom. Sun (2003) explains that web-based extensive reading provides students with a chance to acquire new vocabulary from multi-representative materials such as pictures or videos. Further, it is also mentioned that teachers can keep track of students' reading progress when they handle big-size classes. The Actively Learn web platform was chosen due to its interactive and engaging features, as well as its ability to track and monitor students' progress in real-time. The Actively Learn web platform allows students to read texts online while providing interactive features such as highlighting, note-taking, and embedded multimedia. These features not only enhance the reading experience but also provide opportunities for students to interact with the text and acquire new vocabulary more naturally and enjoyably. The Actively Learn web platform also allows teachers to monitor students' progress and provide feedback in a timely manner. Moreover, Silva (2009) mentions the benefits of implementing web-based extensive reading lie in its power to provide students with access to hundreds of new information and vocabulary and also it was more practical than reading a book. Actively Learn provides both teachers and students with ELA-rich content varying from short stories, to longer ones, poems, news, articles, and dramas.

Before the reading starts students need to answer one or two questions to prepare them for reading. This helps them get close or get a hint about the content of the text they are about to read. This pre-reading activity also helps activate students' prior knowledge and prepare them mentally for the reading by helping students anticipate what they are going to read and activate the relevant vocabulary, which can enhance students' comprehension and retention of the new vocabulary. To get a closer look at the web, see the following figure.



**Figure. 1** An example of a short story in Actively Learn

As shown in the figure, students were informed of the length of the reading they had to do. Previously, the teacher chose the text based on the grade level and the lexile level. Standard set level was not put into consideration since the teacher only wanted the students to experience extensive reading without really paying attention to what skills of reading they would gain from answering questions by the end of the reading texts. Moreover, if the students preferred to read while listening to the text, they could always choose to turn on the *read aloud* feature. They could even adjust the speed to their convenience.

It is also observable in Figure 1 that students are also provided with notes to guide the first-timers what to do with Actively Learn. The notes were not made by the teacher, the web provided the notes under the teacher's name. Students can choose to show the notes or hide them. The teacher can also delete or add other notes when necessary. The teacher can also use this feature to ask students what they think about a certain vocabulary in focus. Students can reply the notes and see their classmates reply as well. This activity can be done while reading or after reading.

The feature the students used a lot in this research was the *define* feature as shown in Figure 2. When students encountered new words, they just needed to double-click (or long-press if they were using their mobile phone) the word. Students could highlight and take notes, classify them into categories or add a picture or a url to help them retain the words better and share their notes with the class. They could also hear how the words are pronounced, or click define the words to see the definition and how they are used in a context, and they could choose translate to find the equivalence in their native language. In this research students were instructed to choose *define* rather than *translate* in order to gain more access to context-rich explanations.

The screenshot shows a digital reading interface. On the left, a text passage is displayed with the word "paralyzed" highlighted in pink. Below the passage, a question is posed: "QUESTION 2 DOK 2 5 points What is the BEST definition of *intelligence* as it is used in paragraph 2?". On the right, a dark-themed dictionary pop-up window is open for the word "paralyze". The window shows the word's phonetic transcription "par\*a\*lyze" and its part of speech "verb". It lists two definitions: 1. "to make (a person or animal) unable to move or feel all or part of the body" with examples like "The snake's venom paralyzed the mouse." and "The accident paralyzed him from the neck down. [=the accident caused him to lose the ability to move or feel his body below his neck]"; 2. "to make (someone or something) unable to function, act, or move" with examples like "The air strikes have paralyzed the city's transportation system." and "The company was paralyzed by debt." At the bottom of the dictionary window, there is a text input field labeled "Define a new word" and a "SUBMIT" button. The text "PROVIDED BY MERRIAM-WEBSTER INC." is visible at the very bottom of the dictionary window.

**Figure. 2** The *define* figure used by the students

## Research Questions

This present study aimed at answering the following research questions:

- 1) What are students' opinions on the process of vocabulary learning with Actively Learn in a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere?
- 2) How do students' reflect on their foreign language enjoyment during vocabulary learning with Actively Learn in a low-anxiety classroom atmosphere?

## Aims

It is the intention of this research to explore the reflection of students and teacher on the foreign language enjoyment in the vocabulary learning process when implementing Actively Learn web platform in a low-anxiety classroom. This research specifically focuses on students' opinions on the use of web-based extensive reading in enhancing their vocabulary knowledge and their reflection on the class activities, the learning strategies, and their foreign language learning enjoyment during vocabulary learning.

## METHOD

The participants were 43 college freshmen majoring in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) taking a vocabulary course in their first semester. Students were directed to read 3 chosen short stories from the Actively Learn. The short stories were 3 to 4 pages long and designed for grade 7 to 12 with 530 to 930 lexile level. These grades were chosen even though the participants were majoring in English due to the gap of English proficiency, considering the students were raised in EFL context while the grade level of the texts was based on K-12 education. This research was done for 8 weeks. In the first week students were introduced to Actively Learn, the class rules regarding the extensive reading, and what they had to do with the readings in Actively Learn. During the following 6 weeks students were asked to read three short stories: (1) An Unlikely Friendship, (2) The Last Night of the World, and (3) The Story of an Hour in order of the lexile level. They were given a week to read a story due to

the tight class schedule and students' workload in other courses. After a week of reading, they come to class to discuss what the story was about, the moral value of the story, and their difficulties in understanding the stories with the class and the teacher. The following week was used to focus on the meaning of difficult words specifically phrasal verbs, collocations, and idioms students found in the story. Additional mobile apps were used to assist them in gaining more knowledge on phrasal verbs, collocations and idioms outside the class.

After reviewing the difficult words, they were also directed to review parts of the story in which those words were found and asked if they had understood the story better after the review. By the end of the class, some students were requested to volunteer to orally tell their impressions after reading the story either in terms of the language used or the content of the story. In meeting 8, the students were instructed to write a 600-to-750-word reflection about the vocabulary learning process during the previous 7 weeks using the phrasal verbs, collocations, and idioms they had learned. Meanwhile, the teacher also kept a journal and wrote a reflection every time a story has been completely discussed.

The data were then analyzed with thematic analysis. Thematic analysis contains steps such as data familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a final report. Deductive and semantic approaches were used when analyzing the data (Byrne, 2022). The themes were preconceived based on Young's (1991) theory on creating low-anxiety classroom atmosphere, Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2016) framework on foreign language enjoyment and foreign language anxiety, and Huckin and Coady's (1999) premise about incidental vocabulary acquisition.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Results**

#### *Web-based extensive reading in enhancing vocabulary knowledge*

Analysis of the data produces four themes in regards to the use of web-based extensive reading in enhancing vocabulary knowledge. These themes include: 1) students and teacher's perceived first impression, 2) students and teacher's efforts in facing the challenges, 3) students' realization of the merits of Actively Learn, and 4) students' resolution. These extracted themes are elaborated as follows:

#### 1) *Students and teacher's perceived first impression*

The analysis of the findings indicated that students were struggling during the third and fifth week of reading the second and third stories (*The Last Night of the World* and *The Story of an Hour*) depicted by the use of idioms such as *It's all Greek to me* or *I was in dire strait* in their reflections. Some students experienced difficulties in understanding a list of words in the first story (*An Unlikely Friendship*) which caused inability to picture some scenes in the story. However, the majority of the class admitted that they could understand the story as a whole because the first story was of pop culture, and the words the author used were not as challenging as the other two stories. Students may understand this better because the setting in the story was so close to their identity as students, as this story was set in a school setting. Nevertheless, the second and the third story caused students distress at some points since the setting of both stories revolved around family connections (as parents or as a spouse) which might hinder them from connecting their prior knowledge since they had not had the chance to be parents or someone's spouse. Moreover, the words used in these two stories greatly differed from the first.

The second story used a roundabout way of explaining what was happening, and there were only two main characters (the husband and the wife) taking turns talking and their inner thoughts displayed in turns without being very clear about who was thinking or talking. This caused confusion on students' behalf which led to difficulties understanding even simple words. Furthermore, the end of the ~~story~~ was unexpected that it ruined students' expectation (in a good way) of how the story should end.

The third story had a different characteristics in challenging students' understanding. The story was a classic, in which descriptions of scenes were made very visual and detailed. This somehow disturbed the students' process of understanding the story since this generation of students was used to the kind of event-to-event stories such as light novels or webtoons. Students explained this with *this old-time story was written in different style to the kind of stories I know*. On top of that, the words used were very *classic* that student had no idea what they were mostly about.

### 2) *Students and teacher's efforts in facing the challenges*

The findings of the data indicated that students were trying hard to cope with their difficulties as they were aware that extensive reading has the potentials for the development of their vocabulary knowledge as shown by statements such as *I'm trying to enjoy this*, or *I hate reading. It's hard but I try, every cloud has a silver lining*. Students mostly used the **define** feature in the web to help them understand the context. For story one and two, this feature was a great assistance. Nevertheless, students were still struggling with the third one. To facilitate students in understanding parts of the stories they failed to grasp due to the lack of vocabulary, the teacher promoted an expressive approach when explaining. She explained, pictured, and described the scenes using gestures and simplified words while trying to relate students' background knowledge with the scenes under question. The teacher took the initiative to explain the scenes students had no idea what they were about sentence-by-sentence. Some students were asked to read aloud in turns to keep students' attention and engagement, and others were asked randomly to guess the meaning of the sentence in focus through the hints given by the teacher. Sometimes, they were probed to relate a situation they knew with the situation in the story. For example when reading this sentence "In the street below a peddler was crying his wares" students were led to picture a situation in which how *pedagang asongan* (street vendors) around students' boarding house tried to sell their stuffs. Through this process, students got to an understanding that the word *crying* in the sentence did not necessarily mean the word *crying* they normally knew. Thus, it triggered students to understand vocabulary in context.

### 3) *Students' realization of the merits of Actively Learn*

The data analysis showed that students came to realization of the merits they experienced after the extensive reading in Actively Learn. They explained that the web was amazing and interesting. Students also stated that the web was very helpful in increasing their vocabulary knowledge specifically about phrasal verbs, collocation, and idioms. They mentioned that the features made it easier for them to understand the story and reduced the time of browsing a translation or search engine. They even got new information how the searched words are used in different context after using the **define** feature. It was shown by one of the idioms used in the reflection, *learning vocabulary this way doesn't need to rack one's brain*. Some others mentioned *I hate reading in general, but in this class I don't think I do. Because I learned lots of new words from reading the stories*.

*Reflection on the class activities*

The data showed that the activities of the class range from 1) difficult or causing suspense, 2) anxiety provoking when appointed, nerve wrecking but satisfying when volunteering, 3) main compulsory tasks, 4) additional-engaging tasks, and 5) totally fun, which can be seen in the following table.

**Table 1.** Reflection on class activities

<b>Range of activities</b>	<b>Example</b>
difficult or causing suspense	Spinning the wheel of names Finding idioms and collocations in the text Differentiating phrasal verbs and what not
anxiety provoking when appointed, nerve wrecking but satisfying when volunteering	Answering teachers' prompts Explaining the meaning of a sentence/paragraph in the story
main compulsory tasks	Looking for phrasal verbs, collocations, idioms in and outside the stories Reading the stories
additional-engaging tasks	Analyzing meanings in group Class discussion
totally fun	Quizzes on Kahoot! Getting feedbacks for the tasks Using lots of new platform for learning

*Reflection on the learning strategies*

According to the data's results, students believed that the teaching strategies were *effective* and *enormously good* because they created positive interactions between students and teachers while maintaining a degree of adherence to the rules. A sense of bonding was established between students and teacher that let them willingly shared their difficulties in comprehending the text. Students mentioned that teacher's assistance was of great help especially when important parts of the stories were too hard to comprehend. They had their fair share of the problems and realized that they were not the only one struggling with the story, expressed with the idiom *all in the same boat* in their reflection.

Students affirmed that the teacher's efforts in depicting the scenes through gestures and descriptions led them to better understanding as it was easier for them to imagine the scenes (expressed with *as clear as a day* in the reflection), and acquiring vocabulary in context was much simpler. They claimed that their *progress was fast*, and that the materials had helped them to retain new vocabulary which they mentioned as *used to be difficult*. Students also pointed out that the pace of the class was *on the ball*, so they would not have time to be idle or even get sleepy. They also explicated that the rules of the class regarding their responsibility in reading all the stories made them feel alert but kept them in check.



### *Reflection on the foreign language learning enjoyment during vocabulary learning.*

The findings demystified students' foreign language learning enjoyment during vocabulary learning into several themes: 1) classroom learning atmosphere, 2) enjoyment of the stories, 3) teacher's figure, and 4) perceived opinions about making mistakes.

#### 1) *Classroom learning atmosphere*

Students depicted the classroom learning atmosphere during the vocabulary learning as *full of the joys of springs, walking on the air, an entire field day, or as high as a kite* indicating that they found the class to be enjoyable, fun, and having good and happy vibes. They illustrated the class as *relaxed but serious* elucidating that jokes were often prevalent, but they did not cause the class to drift away from the goal of the learning.

#### 2) *Enjoyment of the stories*

The data explicated that students found the *time* they read the stories both in class and outside the class to be *flying (time flies, in the reflection)*. They claimed reading short stories made learning seem like *a piece of cake* as they did not feel like they are learning new vocabulary on purpose. Thus, it caused them to feel *not bored and excited for class times*.

#### 3) *Teacher's figure*

Students mentioned the favorite traits they observed from the teacher as full of energy, very friendly and kind, humble, strong personality, teaching with passions, and paying attention to student's progress. Students were rewarded with positive reinforcement whenever they volunteered despite the answers being right or wrong. These traits might led to good relationships between teacher and students which triggered students' openness to difficulties they were facing.

#### 4) *Perceived opinions about making mistakes*

Students initially felt burdened by the possibilities of them giving out wrong answers or incorrect interpretations or depictions of the stories. Nevertheless, in the reflections they pointed out that during the process they felt relieved to understand that mistakes were parts of learning and that everything needed a process. Students were less prone to fear of making mistakes which caused them to be more outspoken and willing to raise hands and actively participating in class.

### **Discussion**

Foreign Language Enjoyment is found to affect students' engagement which later influence their vocabulary acquisition in a foreign language class. The findings of this research proved that students were initially struggling with the extensive reading texts assigned to them but later on found themselves enjoying the process of learning vocabulary through extensive reading by the aid of Actively Learn. The findings are in line with Dewaele and Dewaele (2017) who mention that enjoyable activities promote interest and engagement. It is also mentioned in the results that positive interactions between students and teachers creates a sense of bonding,

and therefore provide students with a less-anxious classroom atmosphere despite the existence of rules adhered in class. This supports Hall and Walsh' (2002) claim that student-teacher interaction promotes learning. When students are bonding with their teacher, they display a sense of openness. They are not reluctant to share their difficulties during the learning process and are willing to help their classmates and also volunteer in class. These are most likely caused by the assurance they get that mistakes are part of learning (Young, 1991). When students are able to accept their own mistakes and understand that their teacher and peers are not going to judge them when they are making one, they become more courageous and are willing to take the risks and actively take parts in the learning. The teacher's figure also plays a big part (Inada, 2021). When a teacher displays an unthreatening, attentive, passionate, but conscientious vibes in front of the class, it sends messages to students that they will be rewarded for trying their best and every effort will be given feedback and appreciated unless when rules are broken. This is useful to keep students in check while encouraging them to participate as a community in the class.

Moreover, variety of learning activities need to be paid attention to (Bryson, 2010). Fun and engaging or even nerve-wrecking activities can be put into a good use. Even when a web-based extensive reading platform is beneficent, it does not mean that it limits variations of other supporting applications, as long as they fit the learning goals. Additionally, teachers should be of great assistance to their students. Depictions through gestures, descriptions, or analogies may provide great help in facilitating students understanding a concept. Vocabulary acquisition can stem from their own perception or image when students are reading the stories. Thus, it is of great importance that instructors explore possibilities of strategies applicable for their classes.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicated that students thought that the process of vocabulary through extensive reading with *Actively Learn* was valuable. The low-anxiety classroom atmosphere triggered their engagement which in some ways helped them with their vocabulary knowledge. Students experienced an abundance of foreign language enjoyment during the class which was the results of variations of activities, classroom atmosphere, teacher's accommodating figures, and their new perception about making mistakes. Regarding the limitation of this study, future researchers are suggested to take measurement of students FLE prior to and after implementing similar strategies in the current research to provide an exact measure of their FLE conditions before and after the implementation.

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