Improving EFL Learners' Reading Motivation With Intensive Reading Using "ReadTheory"

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Abstract

Foundation students need to pass English proficiency courses before joining their Bachelor program. Omani students are English as foreign language (EFL) learners. Therefore, acquiring reading skills is crucial in unlocking their academic performance. The researchers implemented an online intensive reading club seeking to engage unmotivated students into

improving their reading through task-based learning from the ReadTheory website. The objectives were twofold, first to identify factors of engagement in the online intensive reading club leading to improved reading skills, and second to explore how these factors could instill long-term reading motivation. A three-cycle action research was conducted over six months with 10 participants. The systematic thematic analysis of observations, discussions, semi-structured interviews, and artifacts resulted in an in-depth understanding of the demotivation, engagement, learning and acquisition processes. Participation to the intensive reading club resulted in heightened motivation and improved reading skills due to the students' active engagement in the Readtheory enhanced intensive reading tasks. Authentic and meaningful materials, immediate individual performance reports on reading skills and progress contributed to increased engagement, yielding long-term intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivation. The resulting Online intensive reading model will benefit teachers, students, and stakeholders seeking to motivate EFL students to read in the target language.

Keywords: Motivation, Reading, EFL, Online learning, Self-regulated learning

1. Introduction

1.1 Distant Language Learning Context

Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2015) revealed that Omani foundation students perceived studying English as increasingly difficult. According to these authors, this was primary due to the Omani English a foreign language learning (EFL) context. Omani students come from non-native English environments where the English language and culture are very distant from the Arabic language and culture. This concurs with Dewaele (2011) where linguistic and cultural distances are impeding foreign language learning factors affecting the students' motivation to read. Since reading is an essential source to foreign language exposure, demotivation to read in English increases EFL students' lack of exposure to the target language, and thus further hinders learning and acquisition. Furthermore, reading and writing being interconnected literacy skills (Vaughn et al., 2019) issues in reading comprehension can thus affect the learners' overall proficiency skills. Khalidi and Alotaibi (2019) emphasized that EFL students should acquire English reading skills during foundation courses to be able to cope with their major content course requirements. Al-Jarrah and Ismail (2018) stressed that a lack of fluency in oral or written expression impacted the students' attitudes towards the language while Kung (Kung, 2019) highlighted that students find it difficult to get motivated to read in a foreign language. As such Kung concluded that students who were not exposed to reading English texts, intensively or extensively in a non-English environment struggled to adapt and thus failed to meet foundation proficiency requirements.

1.2 Demotivation to Read in English

In a reading and learning environment, motivation is defined as the urge that may give the students the need to participate in their learning, hence determining the level of student commitment and concentration on the learning process (Lin & Chen, 2017). In the context of the current study, discussions with EFL foundation instructors and students attending the ANJIZ student's learning enhancement centre sessions revealed several factors which

affected the learners' motivation in reading tasks and assignments such as insufficient vocabulary and reading strategies, as well as ill-adapted reading text difficulty levels (Al-Qahtani, 2016). Reading demotivation has a substantial impact on students' language learning, hence there is a need for more studies to be conducted in this field in Oman (Behforouz, Al Gaithi, & Fekri, 2021). Al Rabeei et al. (2019) mentioned that reading comics, theatre, and graded stories could engage Omani students in reading activities, however they suggested that novel ways should be examined.

1.3 Creating the Motivation to Read

Consequently, it was necessary to create a virtuous engagement circle that would enhance EFL foundation students' motivation to read and eventually lead to improved reading skills in terms of vocabulary, skimming, scanning, and critical thinking. Gilakjani and Sabouri (2016) advised exposing learners to various genres with tasks involving information skimming and textual analysis. Nambiar et al. (2020) recommended to compensate the lack of exposure to the target language and culture in EFL contexts with a rich learning environment incorporating reading tasks with a focus on the development vocabulary, and cultural elements. Al-Hashmi (2019) advocated incorporating authentic materials to raise Omani teenagers and young adults' engagement and motivation to learn English. Al-Hashmi stressed that students should be able to choose from a wide selection of authentic texts and genres that would match their interests as well as their proficiency levels for a meaningful and personalised learning experience.

According to Dostert and Müller (2020), extrinsic motivation is a reward-based motivational process useful for creating and sustaining learners' interest in the learning process. Learners need such elements as the use of reward schemes that would improve their participation. Forestier et al. (2017) stated that under a reward scheme, students are more motivated to learn. Therefore, in the current study, it was important to select a website that included learning traction elements that could reward the students with points based on time and efforts spent in intensive reading.

Choemue and Mbato (2020) defined intrinsic motivation as the ability to find a reason to undertake a process without external stimulus. As a result, the person develops a personal reason to get involved and feels a need to participate. Self-paced learning is known to enhance the student's inherent appreciation towards a course through increased student involvement in the learning process. According to Johnston et al. (2018), the learning process develops best through variety. The more varied the learning instruction and pedagogy, the more students can learn new content (Black & Wiliam, 2018). Bin Tahir (2017) claimed that proper selection of reading materials enabled students to improve their attitudes towards reading positively. Nurbianta and Dahlia (2018) found that web-based programs designed specifically for English reading skills could boost learners' interest in reading. These programs offer customized reading activities for EFL/English as a second language (ESL) learner based on placement tests. According to Ling et al. (2017), computerized adaptive tests positively decrease students' anxiety and increase their engagement when receiving prompt feedback on their performance. Tracking recorded progression is a key factor instilling

intrinsic motivation leading improvement (Khaola & Mahao, 2019) due to raised self-confidence in their competence to improve (Wigfield et al., 2016). Sun and Gao (2020) inferred that computer and mobile assisted language learning could increase learners' motivation to read with tasks providing opportunities to enrich cognitive and critical thinking skills. Ahmed (2018) showed the positive impact of interactive reading with the ReadTheory website. Being able to select from a variety of newspaper clippings enhanced students' motivation to read and their reading skills as students became critical readers through the website-built reading comprehension activities. Ahmed reported that the students' positive experience of online reading was related to the wide range of reading passages that met the learners' interests.

As such, in the current study, the researchers identified the ReadTheory website for the Intensive reading program to expose EFL foundation students to interactive reading with meaningful, authentic texts and tasks. ReadTheory's key features related to meaningful and personalized learning consists of an initial placement test ensuring progressive learners' exposure to texts within their English proficiency levels, and immediate individual progress tracking records and feedback reports allowing both student and teacher performance tracking. Furthermore, developers incorporated gamified learning features such as cumulated earned points, titles, and badges. For instructors, monitoring students' participation and performance gives them cues on their learners' motivation to read and assists in evaluating their progress. These features were aligned with the primary goal of the current study which was to enhance long-term reading motivation among foundation students by supporting and engaging students in intensive reading with ReadTheory in the Reading club.

1.4 Aim of the Research

In Oman, Abdullah, Hussin, et al., (2019) reported that students lacked motivation to read in English. Sabiri (2019) related the lack of intrinsic motivation to the EFL learning context. A blended learning solution could enhance Omani EFL students' motivation to read (Ahmed, 2018). In the current study, the authors created an Intensive reading book club seeking to provide authentic, ubiquitous, and self-regulated learning opportunities to reading. The ReadTheory website was retained as a reading platform based on findings from the literature in congruence with the needs to improve reading motivation and reading comprehension skills. Al Rabeei et al. (2019), found improvement in critical reading, and reading comprehension skills with the ReadTheory website as well as reported, enhanced motivation to read due to the availability of authentic reading passages from various genres and topics that could attract learners' interests. Furthermore, the ReadTheory website was designed for EFL learners to independently practice their reading skills.

Therefore, the objectives of the study were twofold, first to identify factors of engagement in the online intensive reading club leading to improved reading skills, and second to explore how these factors could instill long-term reading motivation in students.

2. Method

The research design was a practical action research design. According to Mills (2011),

practical action research allows for investigating an educational problem from the perspectives of teachers and students, through cyclical inquiry and systematic improvements to find immediately applicable solutions to the research context. When qualitative research involves studying people's social lives and perspectives, Creswell (2007) recommended developing an action research method to address the research problem. Action research is a suitable way to investigate educational issues to enhance educational settings (Edwards & Burns, 2015). For instance, educators conduct action research to solve specific educational issues related to their teaching to improve their professional practices in education (Postholm & Skrøvset, 2013). A qualitative approach was likely to give a more profound knowledge and understanding of the teaching and learning potential of the ReadTheory intensive reading implementation in terms of teachers' and learners' perceptions, engagement, and progress throughout the research.

2.1 Theoretical and Conceptual Research Design

Kopsov (2019), in congruence with Maslow's hierarchical levels of needs, noted that people may not develop interest if they have not achieved basic elements. Subsequently, in the current study, Maslow's hierarchical levels of needs adapted to language learning were used to understand the learners' reading skills level (Aruma & Hanachor, 2017, p. 16) in relation to their motivation level. In our adaptation of Maslow's five-step model of needs to EFL reading illustrated in Figure 1, the first need situated at the bottom of the pyramid is to learn language basics. The second need is to establish social learning goals. The third need consists of improving self-reflection. The fourth need is to achieve self-confidence. Finally at the top of the pyramid, the fifth need is self-regulation.
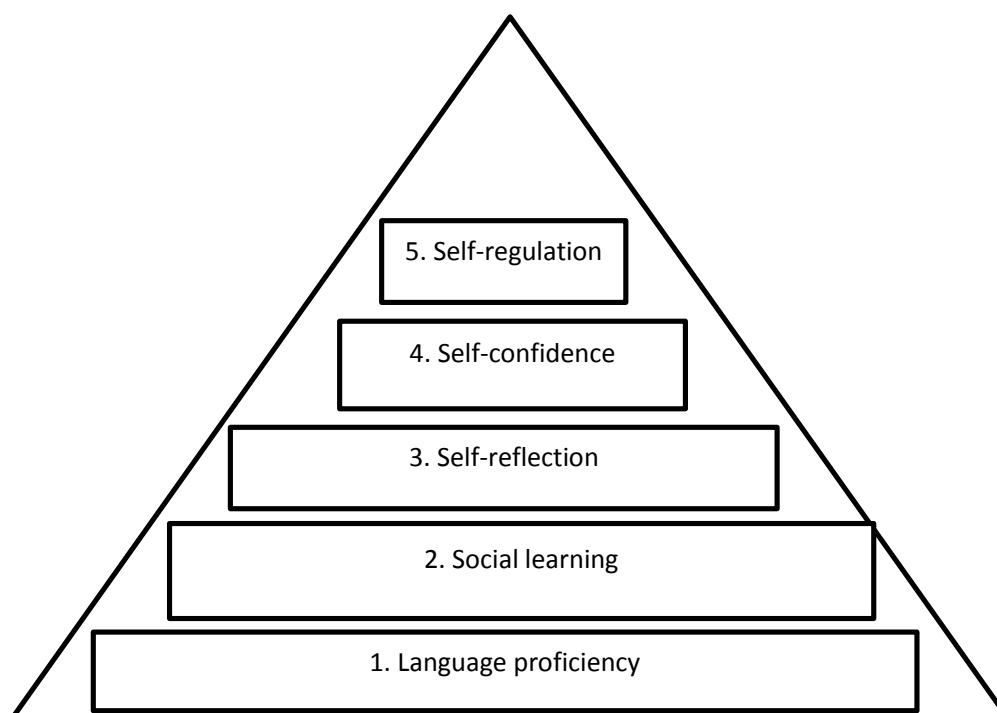

Figure 1. Hierarchical levels of reading needs (Adapted from Aruma & Hanachor, 2017, p. 16)

Therefore, the students who registered in the Intensive reading club were identified based on their English proficiency, social learning goals, self-reflecting and self-determining skills (Neubauer & Martskvishvili, 2018). The model was used to monitor the students' progress as well as to facilitate the self-determination process through helping students with identifying their strengths and needs (Desmet & Fokkinga, 2020). The learners at various levels could seek support from those ahead of them in terms of language skills. It was vital to help learners recognize their language reading growth paths, to support their involvement and progress (Aruma & Hanachor, 2017). When students are informed about their learning placement test result in ReadTheory, they could understand their achievements and need for improvement. The students could then make plans to achieve the next learning level. The available automated assessment and performance progress reports would guide their learning plan towards reaching future goal. Therefore, it was expected that once students would have acquired and fulfilled their basic knowledge needs, they would then develop the need to see their progression move from basic level needs to the next higher level and so on (Herrmann−Abell & DeBoer, 2018).

2.2 Settings and Participants

The participants were 10 foundation students aged between 18 and 19 years old. EFL foundation instructors had referred these students to attend the ANJIZ Centre's Intensive reading club due to their lack of reading skills. Most importantly, all students were reported as demotivated. The initial sample comprised ten foundation students enrolled in the Intensive reading club program at the Foundation Institute at the University of Nizwa. All ten students had completed grade 12 English courses that integrated intensive and extensive reading in the secondary before joining the foundation program. All the students met the following sampling criteria. They had consented to participate in the research and to register to the Intensive reading club program. They were demotivated and lacked basic English proficiency skills. EFL instructors identified students with low motivation due to various factors based on Koran's criteria (2015): Avoidance to read in front of peers for fear of making mistakes, evidence of low self-esteem such as shame and embarrassment, lack of confidence, fear of teacher feedback about their performance in reading. The first author was involved as an active participant as the lecturer responsible for the Intensive reading club program. She designed and conducted the Intensive reading sessions, as well as monitored the participants' involvement and progress. Furthermore, she has access to the students' accounts on the ReadTheory website.

The final sample of six participants was selected out of the10 students registered in the Intensive reading program based on their commitment and consent to participate in the program and research. Two participants dropped out of the study after the second cycle of investigation due to their busy schedules while another two participants were not committed to attending the Intensive reading sessions nor willing to participate in the assigned intensive reading tasks with the ReadTheory website.

All participants were assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality and anonymity purposes; there were Warda, Maya, Reem, Shooq, Mariya, and Zahra. Warda hated reading in English, whereas Reem preferred to read in Arabic. Reem and Zahra avoided reading in English as

they felt embarrassed about their levels. Shooq and May believed that English was boring and complicated and that they had no reason to read in English as it was not their native language. Mariya disclosed that she was forced to read in English. The research received the approval of the institution ethical review board.

2.3 Cyclical Intervention Research Design

The three-cycle action research implementation illustrated in Figure 2 was conducted over six months from October 2020 to March 2021. In cycle one, the participants attended an online orientation session where they registered to the Intensive reading program and created their account on ReadTheory. The students were instructed to complete the ReadTheory placement test. For two weeks, the students were guided to independently use the website features to start exploring intensive reading on ReadTheory. In this stage, the intensive book club lecturer set English proficiency and simple reading goals for the students to compete with their peers to engage them to read intensively to gain knowledge points. The goals targeted to bring the students from the first to the second needs of the pyramid.

In the second cycle, the students were involved in a set of English proficiency building and reading skill activities in synchronous and asynchronous weekly assignments within the Intensive reading book club. For six weeks, the students were invited weekly to log into the ReadTheory website and select reading texts to study. The students would then present their favourite texts in a live session with their peers, speaking about what they had read, sharing their ideas, and writing about what they had read. These tasks contributed to getting the students acquainted with the website as well as with their peers and lecturer. At the end of Cycle 2, the participants could compete with their colleagues by gaining knowledge points and at the same time, they were sufficiently proficient to summarize their readings, share their thoughts, learn new vocabulary, and self-assess the benefits they had gain from reading with ReadTheory and what they needed to improve. Thus, the students were progressively guided throughout the first to the third needs of the pyramid.

In the third cycle, from February to March, the final sample was identified based on the analysis of their participation, long-term usage, and motivation. The students were self-regulated and had therefore reached the fourth and fifth needs of the pyramid. They logged to the ReadTheory website without incentives from the lecturer.
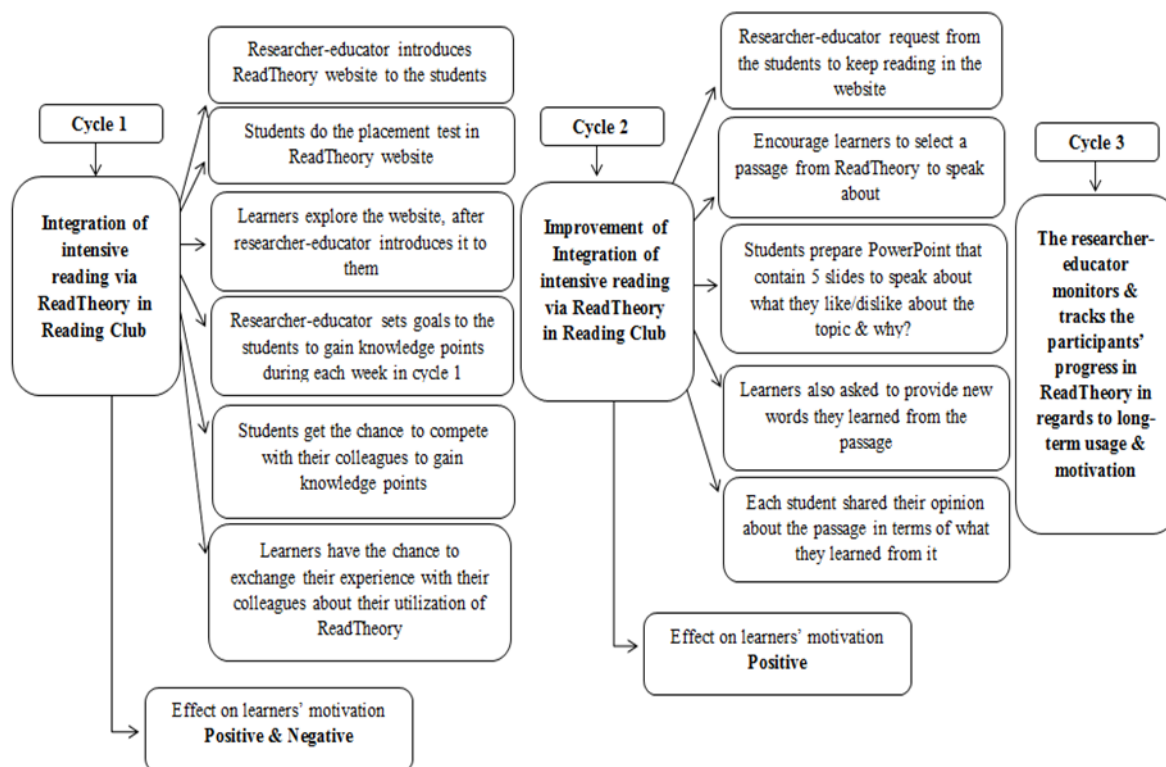
Figure 2. Practical model of intensive reading with ReadTheory

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

The instruments were semi-structured interviews, observations, informal discussions, and artefacts. The interviews were conducted in Arabic and audio recorded with the consent of the participants. The recordings were transcribed into textual data for the thematic coding analysis. For thematic textual analysis data was categorized into major themes and subthemes, useful; to infer relationships between motivation, engagement, and improvement of reading skills (Nowell et al., 2017). To ensure the richness and comprehensiveness of the data, triangulation with multiple instruments as well as multiple participants elicited data was performed. According to Yilmaz (2013), instrument triangulation drives the design of qualitative action research. It provides detailed information on the acquired data and mixes it with critical theories, making it rich and complete in terms of information, hence the increased level of trustworthiness, credibility, and resonance in the outcome (Tarhini et al., 2015). Quotes related to the themes and code to demonstrate the results from the thematic analysis as grounded in the data. It was useful in the organization of the findings into emerging key themes. The key themes included motivation, engagement, exposure to reading material, English proficiency, and technology-enhanced learning drawn from emerging inductive codes. Patterns, and relationships between themes were inferred to answer the research questions. The day analytical process, therefore, explored the outcome based on thematic coding analysis (Nowell et al., 2017).

3. Results

Findings are reported according to the objectives of the study which were 1) factors of

engagement in the online intensive reading club leading to improved reading skills, and 2) factors instilling long-term reading motivation in students.

3.1 Meaningful Factors of Engagement in the Intensive Reading Club

Intensive interaction with the ReadTheory website emerged as the main finding related to improved engagement throughout the program. The semi-structured interviews, observations, and analysis of ReadTheory website artifacts resulted in four main themes relating the students' engagement to motivation which were suitability of reading texts to learners' skill levels, meaningful topics combined with pictures, receiving immediate feedback on mistakes with explanations within each performance tracking report, rewards and titles gained from accumulated knowledge points in gamified reading quizzes.

3.1.1 Reading Placement Test

The initial reading placement test from the ReadTheory website positively influenced the students' engagement. Reem reported the placement test as "***an incredible idea***". Mariya and Shooq mentioned that knowing their level as "**encouraging**" and the placement test as *"the best first step"*. They explained that "*the texts were set **according** to **the student identified level. The complexity** and **length differed** as well as the **vocabulary**"*. All participants agreed that ReadTheory facilitated the reading process with texts that "**matched**" their level with "***easy vocabulary"*** so the text *was **understandable***". Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2015) reported that the reading text should be aligned with the learners' proficiency for productive reading skills especially in post-basic levels. Al Damen (2018) concurred adding that the selection of reading texts should be appropriate to the students' abilities not to discourage learners.

3.1.2 Authenticity

Authenticity and variety unanimously led to the students' positive attitude toward reading. Warda and Maya disclosed that "*The **topics** were **interesting** because **they** were **always authentic** and **novel.** Warda added that "the texts had **rich, interesting themes** to read about**"** while Zahra appreciated the fact that **"***the themes were **always changing**.*" Mohseni Takaloo & Ahmadi (2017) reported that progressive reading exposure to various texts and genres as well as themes facilitated the learning process in EFL courses. Al-Busaidi and Al-Seyabi (2021) indicated that assigning appropriate reading materials to EFL learners' actual level through integrating multimedia into the learning process would impact students' motivation positively.

3.1.3 Imbedded Multimedia Cues

Imbedded Multimedia content stimulated the students' reading engagement. According to Zahra, the texts were attractive with "***colourful pictures.***" Moreover, engaging pictures resulted in improved comprehension to EFL learners. Students would first look at the images to infer the theme before reading the text. Images allowed for improved interaction with the texts even though students found the text difficult to read at first. The texts included **"***pictures with colours** that **attracted attention. The pictures** were **linked** to the **entire reading topic so** we could **understand** the **main idea** from the **picture"*** (Reem & Mariya). Similarly, Warda emphasized that pictures led to "***meaningful understanding***". Accordingly, Hoffman (2018)

indicated that comics could be used in EFL to raise reading interest while stimulating cognitive processes. Al-Shamsi et al. (2020) found multimedia cues heightened engagement and improved listening skills. Omani students enjoy digital reading (Little & Al Wahaibi, 2017). Therefore, the participants' feedback regarding coloured pictures and their impact on reading motivation in English is congruent with Behforouz et al. (2021).

3.1.4 Variety of Question Types

All participants perceived the Readtheory varied types of quiz questions as a contributing factor of their reading skill performance in their EFL reading examinations. The participants attributed their improved reading skills to their improved skimming and scanning skills due to their exposure to reading skill tasks and quizzes in ReadTheory. Warda noted "ReadTheory *quizzes made me **understand the questions** in the **English Course Exams** like **True/False***." Maya added that she was able to "use *the **questions** to **realize general ideas and specific answers***". Shooq mentioned that the quizzes question helped "***infer the meaning, testing grammar**, and **vocabulary knowledge. In addition,** you **will** need **to skim for** some answers, and **to scan** for others.*" All participants mentioned the quiz report graphs as a motivational factor of improvement which nourished their engagement to persevere in their reading efforts. Zahra emphasized that the report was beneficial in helping her identify the types of questions that required her attention, **"***The **graphs show** me **my performance for each skill. I can see** that where **I am improving** and what I need to **improve**"*. In the Omani context, Zafar Khan (2011) found that reading comprehension should be tested with varied questions requiring focus on searching for specific information such as vocabulary, grammar, and meaning. Being exposed to various types of questions in reading texts would familiarize students with expected answers.

3.1.5 Performance Tracking Reports

Providing EFL learners with immediate and continuous reports about their progress engaged the students by making them aware of their achievements and needs for improvement. All students perceived the progress reports as engaging. Zahra, for instance, commented that "***Looking** at the **website feedback***" she could realize that she was "***improving***" *and* what she needed "***to focus on** to **keep improving***". Most importantly, Zahra appreciated that she could track her *"**performance by herself**."* Mariya explained that seeing where her mistakes were made her "***reflect***" on her performance. Findings clearly showed that the participants became more engaged in reading on the ReadTheory website due to the performance tracking features. Immediate feedback kept them positively stimulated. The feedback reports provided self-regulated learning affordances which motivated the students to engage in further self-reading for improvement.

3.1.6 Gamified Intensive Reading

Integrating games and rewards in the intensive reading program led to a positive effect on EFL learners' motivation. Referring to the Reading club weekly sessions, Maya indicated, "***games** were **motivating**. When the **club** teacher did competitions or games, the students were **encouraged** to read. Reading was **not boring**.*" The website was perceived as a web-based

competition among the Intensive reading club students to encourage them to read in English. **Maya** indicated that "*interestingly, the website is like a game*" where she can "*gain points and titles on all levels.*" Warda explained how on the ReadTheory Website, she would "*avoid making mistakes, like be careful not to answer wrongly*" to avoid "*losing knowledge points*". Maya added that "*Competing with friends to gain points*" was addictive as she wanted "to *earn more and more points*".

Shook felt the same addiction as she "*always*" wanted to get" *right answers to get high marks to move to the next level and to have a title*". Mariya expressed her enthusiasm "*the more knowledge points, the more titles, that's fantastic*" while Zahra was "*curious to know what the new title for the next level was*". Gamification modeling combined to performance tracking and feedback can provide useful feedback to Omani EFL students in Oman as the gamification process increases the sense that improvement is reachable (Govindarajan, 2020). Accordingly, Dicheva, Irwin, and Dichev, (2018) suggested that the need for gamification and immediate feedback provides a diversified and self-paced learning environment with room for self-reflection and self-assessment that can induce improved learning. Furthermore, rewarding student achievement in reading tasks with external rewards like marks or appreciation in front of their peers led learners to read more. For example, Reem claimed "*The idea of gaining points and titles to move to the next level is magnificent; I have to challenge myself to win the game*". These studies were a confirmation of Chang and Hsu's (2011) findings related to flow learning because of feedback-giving challenges leading to extrinsic rewards.

3.1.7 Promoting Engagement to Read With Readtheory

Figure 3 summarizes the benefits that the participants experienced in improving their motivation to read while learning through the ReadTheory website.
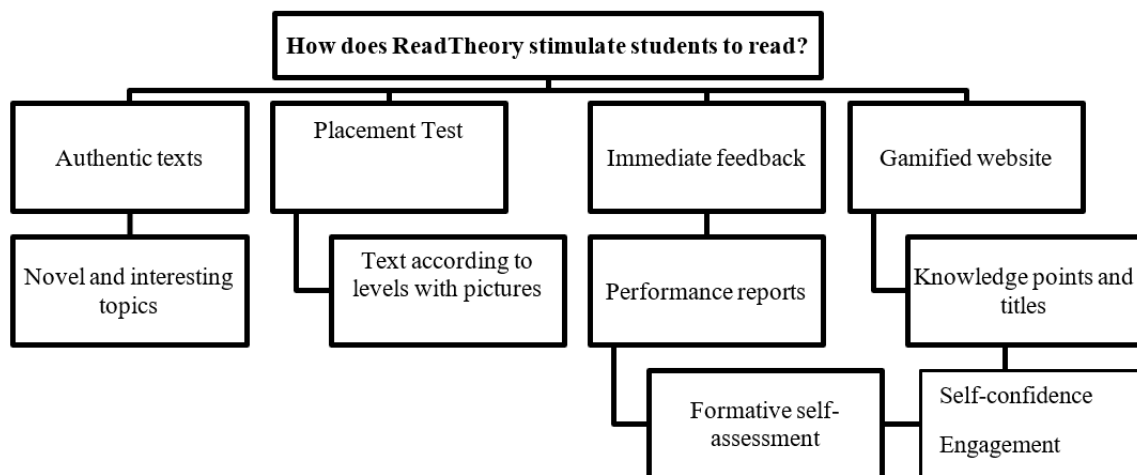

Figure 3. Benefits of intensive reading via ReadTheory on reading motivation

Students need a self-paced learning environment providing exposure to rich content with guided tasks and feedback to gain a holistic understanding of the benefits associated to improved reading skills in their EFL leaning process. The essential features of Readtheory

found to engage students included authentic and varied texts, immediate performance feedback, and gamified learning elements such as cumulated earned points, titles gained per level reached. These features boosted participation and were vital remedies against perceived failure induced boredom. According to Barrett et al. (2020), online self-paced learning programs provide seamless learning opportunities because completing tasks one after another creates a virtuous engagement process leading to improved skills and thus results. Authentic reading provides meaningful exposure nourishing motivation (Namaziandost & Nasri, 2019).

However, the selection of reading texts as per the student's reading and proficiency levels ensured that not only did the texts match the students' interest but also their learning needs. ReadTheory's imbedded pictural cues genuinely attracted the students while facilitated their general understanding of the text and thus inferring vocabulary. Associated with the automatically generated performance progress and tasks completion feedback reports, progressive textual exposure resulted in increased engagement which led to increased reading and English proficiency skills (Sun & Gao, 2020). The students could individually gauge their weaknesses and strengths which helped them develop the right learning focus and attitude towards reading. Learner-centered autonomous learning materials and immediate test results are best implemented in a self-paced and gamified learning environment (Baiden et al., 2022; Tsay et al., 2018).

3.2 Self-regulated Learning Factors of Long-term Motivation

Emerging grounded themes related to long-term motivation resulted from the students' positive perceptions of the Intensive reading program as providing them with a non-threatening environment. Formative self-paced learning and assessment, sense of enhanced performance, heightened confidence was reported as factors leading to intrinsic reading motivation culminating with reading for pleasure and the development of autonomous learning attitudes.

3.2.1 A Non-threatening Self-paced Learning Environment

Task performance reports created opportunities for formative and self-assessment which initiated the self-reflective process. All the participants mentioned that they felt more relaxed and confident performing the reading tasks on ReadTheory. Self-study was perceived as reassuring because performed in private. Shooq explained that she was pleased to "*discover*" that her reading "was not so bad" during the placement test. Realizing her level gave her "*confidence and courage to start from the beginning and continue performing on the website*". Maya commented that **"After using the website"** she could "*find many topics to speak about"* because she could develop ideas based on the I *start to use the vocabulary that is included in reading passages. I find it useful in writing. My grammar has improved as well*".

The self-paced tasks and automatically generated reports were described as comforting and as creating a sense of control over their learning due to identified strengths and weaknesses. *"The assessment is amazing; I can go back to my answers and see my mistakes. This makes me reflect on my performance. I can answer without fear of making mistakes or losing marks*", Zahra. Being engaged in self-reflection raised the students' awareness of their

learning progress and improved performance. Seenak and Adunyarittigun (2019) described that class test results negatively affected EFL learners' confidence raising disappointment, fear, and anxiety. Class tests are summative and therefore, tasks performed with Readtheory in the Intensive reading club students provided these students with opportunities to practice ahead of class tests.

Self-confidence and pride are highlighted in the following excerpt from Mariya when she recalls her improvement **"*The more I read in ReadTheory, the faster I become in reading. The vocabulary is always repeated in the reading texts which makes me notice words and their usage in different texts. My spelling has improved a lot; before, I would use easy words to avoid spelling mistakes, but after using the ReadTheory website, I feel I am confident to write more advanced words*"**. All participants reported obtaining higher marks in all proficiency skills. Warda clearly related her progress in English to her engagement in the Intensive reading program in the following excerpt. "My **marks have improved. The thing** *that* **always makes me use the ReadTheory program** *is that I can* **see** *my* **improvement in reading** *and* **other English skills** *like* **speaking and writing**".

3.2.2 Confidence Building Factors Leading to Autonomous Learning

Findings highlighted the emergence of self-learning in reading after being exposed to the ReadTheory from the second cycle. Maya commented that with ReadTheory, she felt independent as she did not need to ask her lecturer for feedback on her extra work. Enhanced confidence while reading through ReadTheory motivated all participants "*to* **look for things** *to* **read in English**". Maya read "*all the* **stories"** in her *textbooks*" which demonstrates that Maya had passed the threshold proficiency level where she could start exploring reading independently. Similarly, Reem confided that she used to "***rely on teachers for vocabulary and reading***", however since participating to the Intensive reading program, she concluded that she had learnt to rely on herself and "**started** *to* **find other ways** *to* **read by downloading reading Apps, and web searching for texts**". Furthermore, Mariya reported that practicing her reading encouraged her to challenge herself further. **"*ReadTheory* took me from one level *to another* gradually and challenged *me so that* I always want to compete with myself**". This concurs with Jose and Abidin's (2015) findings related to their Moodle e-learning EFL program.

3.2.3 Reading for Pleasure

A shift from reading for assignment and test preparation to reading for pleasure emerged from the second cycle of the Intensive reading program. All participants disclosed their recently discovered enjoyment in reading. For instance, Shooq contrasted her recent efforts and enjoyment to read in English with how she used to "***hate reading long passages but was now enjoying reading them***". Shooq explained related her enjoyment to the website gradual approach as illustrated in the following excerpt. "*The* **step-by-step from** *short easy paragraphs to* **advanced** *texts helped. If the website gave me* **a hard** *passage* and I **did not** *do* **well, I** *was* **automatically provided** *with an* **easier passage** *that* I **could answer.** *This kept my* **motivation up always**". Moreover, Warda explained that after exploring the ReadTheory

website, she started to look for reading resources mentioning that she had started "following *useful accounts* on *social media* to *read every day*".

In addition, Maya explained that she developed a daily reading routing in English remembering how she "*used to **hate reading** in **English***" but she "***never hesitated to read two* to *four4 pages a day***". Furthermore, Shooq noted how she "started *to **like reading in English, listening** to **music in English**, and **looking** for **more resources"** to raise her knowledge about English and English culture. Moreover, Zahra realized that reading English "bo*oks had become a habit"* adding that if she did not read one day, she "*felt something **was missing***". Hence, Zahra concluded that she had read "***more English books** than **before***". This is proof that EFL learners can change their reading habits through enhanced confidence, self-esteem, and enjoyment. This concurs with Plakhova et al. (2019) who reported that finding enjoyment was essential in the learning process. Dhanani and Abu-Ayyash (2021) concluded that motivation was enhanced in e-learning programs when tailored to user's needs.

3.2.4 Promoting Long-term EFL Reading Motivation

Sustaining long-term engagement is challenging especially for EFL learners. However, the participants reported that the tasks on the ReadTheory website raised their awareness and attitude leading to autonomous learning and reading for pleasure. Figure 4 illustrates the long-term motivational processes observed.
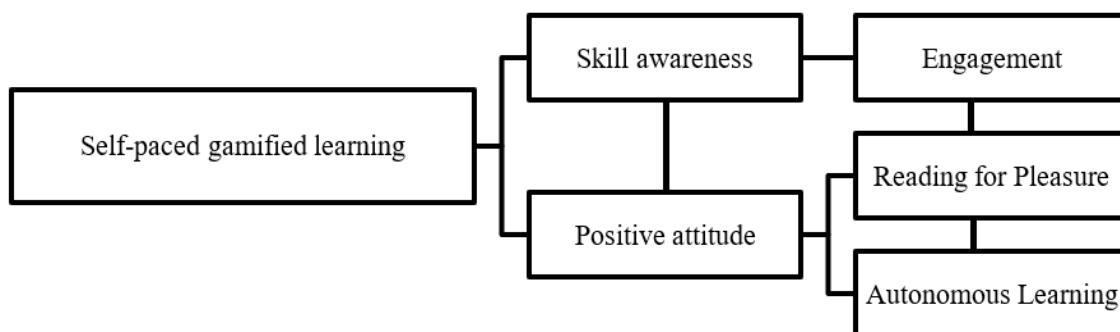

Figure 4. Long-term Motivational Mechanisms

Self-paced gamified learning developed the students' awareness regarding their proficiency levels and achievements. Most participants disclosed that they were positively surprised by their results in the ReadTheory placement test. All these participants displayed low self-esteem characteristics. Therefore, once enrolled according to their level, the progressive and personalized self-paced reading program facilitated the development of self-regulated leaning routine. Their self-perceptions changed as they gained confidence from the feedback reports. Gamified features nurtured the students' positive attitude to learning while private and formative generated feedback provided a non-threatening environment for the students to persevere in their efforts. According to Williams and Williams (2011), performance in class tests is closely related to confidence levels. Bowen et al. (2007) found that confident learners

could better handle tests because they reacted better to the unexpected.

All participants reported improved marks from their course test results which they attributed to the Intensive reading program. Learners in a self-paced learning environment perform individual efforts due to their intrinsic motivation. The students become committed to learning, hence they develop a learning routine and progressively become autonomous, selecting their own reading sources and materials. Achieving the reading for pleasure stage further feeds autonomous learning while fulfilling long-term motivation. The students' learning success largely depends on their attitudes and awareness.

4. Discussion

Results showed meaningful reading as the main motivational drive in raising Omani foundation students through engaged learning. Meaningful reading emerged as the selection of appropriate authentic texts suitable to the students' English proficiency level, as well as thematically varied to match the learners' interests in terms of topics. Reading engagement derived from facilitating conditions provided through imbedded multimedia cues to ease the reading comprehension process, aligning text selection to the learners' proficiency, and reading skills. The ReadTheory website was found suitable for the Intensive reading program since all these features were available. All texts were automatically sorted according to the students' reading and English proficiency skills. These skills were identified through the placement test and further refined throughout the ReadTheory tracking record system as students read and performed the tasks and quizzes. Gamified learning elements such as the accumulated knowledge points and titles further maintained the students' engaged. All these features were highlighted as creating an engaging and safe learning environment where students felt motivated to participate due to their increased confidence.

Long-term reading motivation resulted from enhanced awareness of their improvements within the Intensive reading program as well as from their improved marks in class tests. Awareness triggered positive attitudes and intrinsic motivation processes. Intrinsic motivation emerged from self-paced learning stimulated with automated immediate performance feedback and reports. The students perceived a sense of control over text selection, and task selection based on their identified needs highlighted in the performance reports. Knowing their strengths and weaknesses instilled self-regulated learning. Progressively, the students began to willingly being attracted to reading more in their daily routine, first from ReadTheory, then from their course textbooks. Ultimately, reading for pleasure led to autonomous learning with students independently seeking external reading sources.

Recommendations to EFL instructors, and curriculum designers are to include differentiated and self-paced learning opportunities for learners which could be delivered in a blended learning mode or as co-curricular activities either through institutional learning platforms or with websites like ReadTheory. The reading texts and tasks should be within the students' proficiency and reading skills to facilitate engagement into the program. As such students should receive an initial placement test, then task performance and progress feedback to accompany their self-regulated learning efforts. This research was conducted with foundations students form a private university in Oman. Since every instructional context is

unique, further research is needed to investigate reading motivation and reading programs on a larger scale.

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