

Reading for pleasure as a tool for vocabulary development in students of English as a foreign language (EFL)

La lectura por placer como herramienta para el desarrollo del vocabulario en estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera-EFL

A leitura por prazer como ferramenta para o desenvolvimento do vocabulário em aprendizes de inglês como língua estrangeira-EFL

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of reading for pleasure as a pedagogical strategy to foster vocabulary development in English as a foreign language (EFL) among undergraduate students. The research was conducted with a population of 120 students enrolled in the eighth semester of the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages program at Universidad Técnica de Manabí, distributed from class sections (A, B, and C). A mixed-method design was used that combined the use of quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with instructors. Statistical recalculations were completed to ensure internal consistency of frequency, percentage, and tabular data. Results indicated that reading for enjoyment contributes to an increase in vocabulary development (receptive and productive), reading comprehension, and writing skills. Teachers agreed that creating a context for learning vocabulary through voluntary reading is very important; they also suggested using strategies such as prediction, the use of a dictionary and book fairs as additional means to create context. The discussion section contrasts the current findings with international literature, highlighting similarities with studies involving extensive reading, intrinsic motivation, and digital reading. Therefore, the study concludes that systematic reading for enjoyment programs may be a viable pedagogical intervention to promote vocabulary development in EFL environments.

Palabras clave: Reading for enjoyment, vocabulary development, EFL pedagogy, extensive reading, motivation.

RESUMEN

Este estudio analiza el papel de la lectura por placer como estrategia pedagógica para fomentar el desarrollo del vocabulario en inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) en estudiantes universitarios. La investigación se realizó con una población de 120 estudiantes del octavo semestre de la carrera de Pedagogía de los Idiomas Nacionales y Extranjeros de la Universidad Técnica de Manabí, distribuidos de las secciones A, B y C. Fue empleado un diseño mixto que integró encuestas cuantitativas y entrevistas cualitativas a docentes. Los cálculos estadísticos fueron completados para asegurar la consistencia de frecuencia interna, porcentajes y tabulación de datos. Los hallazgos indican que la lectura por placer contribuye a un incremento en el desarrollo del vocabulario (receptivo y productivo), la comprensión lectora y la escritura. Los docentes coinciden que la creación de un contexto para aprender vocabulario a través de la lectura voluntaria es fundamental, además sugieren el uso de estrategias como la predicción, el uso del diccionario y las ferias de libros. La discusión contrasta los hallazgos de esta investigación con la literatura internacional, resaltando similitudes con estudios que involucran lectura

extensiva, motivación intrínseca y la lectura digital. Se concluye que los programas estructurados de lectura por placer pueden ser entendidos como intervenciones pedagógicas efectivas para promover el vocabulario en contextos EFL.

Keywords: Lectura por placer, desarrollo del vocabulario, pedagogía EFL, lectura extensiva, motivación.

RESUMO

Este estudo investiga o papel da leitura por prazer como estratégia pedagógica para promover o desenvolvimento do vocabulário em inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL) entre estudantes universitários. A pesquisa foi realizada com uma população de 120 estudantes do oitavo semestre do curso de Pedagogia das Línguas Nacionais e Estrangeiras da Universidad Técnica de Manabí, distribuídos das seções A, B e C. Foi aplicado um desenho de métodos mistos, combinando questionários quantitativos e entrevistas qualitativas com professores. Os cálculos estatísticos foram completados para assegurar consistência interna em frequências, percentuais e tabulação de dados. Os resultados indicaram que a leitura por prazer contribui a um incremento no desenvolvimento de vocabulário (receptivo e produtivo), a compreensão leitora e a escrita. Os docentes coincidem que a criação de um contexto para aprender vocabulário a través da leitura voluntária é muito importante, além disso sugerem o uso de estratégias como previsão, uso de dicionário e feiras de livros. A discussão contrasta esses achados com a literatura internacional, destacando convergências com estudos que envolvem leitura extensiva, motivação intrínseca e leitura digital. Conclui-se que os programas estruturados de leitura por prazer podem ser entendidos como intervenções pedagógicas efetivas para promover o vocabulário em contextos EFL.

Palavras-chave: Leitura por prazer, desenvolvimento de vocabulário, pedagogia EFL, leitura extensiva, motivação.

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Introduction

Reading for pleasure has been consistently recognized as one of the most influential factors in the development of literacy, motivation, and vocabulary acquisition in both first and foreign language contexts. Unlike compulsory reading, which is often associated with academic obligations and external pressures, voluntary engagement with texts fosters intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, and deeper cognitive processing (Baker & Wigfield, 1999; Becker *et al.*, 2010). The difference between voluntary reading and forced reading is essential because the former creates long-lasting interest, empathy for other people, and creates vocabulary development, while the latter results in lack of interest to no vocabulary development (Abimbola *et al.*, 2021). In the English as a foreign language (EFL) area, voluntary reading has been studied extensively as a strategy to improve vocabulary size, vocabulary richness, reading comprehension, and writing. Gardner (2004), for example, found that using extensive reading material enables students to see the same word in various ways within a contextual framework. Therefore, through real world experience, students can learn about vocabulary acquisition through indirect methods. Ghanbari and Marzban (2014) further supported this theory by showing that extensive reading has a major impact on the ability to retain vocabulary indirectly, in that the more frequently you see the word will increase the likelihood you will remember it, and have context for remembering it when you encounter it again. More recent studies have expanded on this perspective by demonstrating that there are reciprocal relationships between vocabulary and reading comprehension such that sufficient quantities of vocabulary (breadth and richness) result in increased reading success (Wang & Zhang, 2025). These findings underscore the necessity of integrating reading for pleasure into EFL curricula to address persistent vocabulary deficits.

International evidence further supports the role of reading for pleasure in academic achievement and socio-emotional development. Sullivan and Brown (2015) found that voluntary reading not only improves vocabulary but also correlates with progress in mathematics, suggesting broader cognitive benefits. According to Nell (1988), the psychological benefits derived from reading are based on pleasurable involvement, which keeps learners engaged and encourages perseverance while learning. In addition, Zhu *et al.* (2024) conducted meta-analyses that suggest digital reading environments can provide a great deal of support for vocabulary acquisition if learners are properly supported in choosing appropriate texts and strategies. Thus, Kucirkova and Cremin (2018, 2020) found that personalized digital libraries can enhance engagement and autonomy when it comes to recreational reading through digital formats.

Despite the advances on a global level, there are many problems with regard to the Ecuadorian context. Research conducted at public universities demonstrates that most students entering the university have lower than expected levels of vocabulary development for their age, according to the Ministerio de Educación de

Ecuador's (González Reyes *et al.*, 2018) EFL curriculum (Peña-Ledesma, 2024). The Ministry of Education, therefore, has set out to teach English beginning in early years and has established the goal of having students achieve B1 English proficiency by the end of the secondary program and B2 by the end of their college years (Peña-Ledesma, 2024). Deficiencies in education prior to university can be leading causes of students failing to meet the benchmarks required of university students. The absence of institutional programs promoting leisure reading at the university level compounds deficiencies in earlier instruction; thus, creating limited opportunities for students to enhance their vocabulary through voluntary reading. Teachers have, themselves, admitted that common strategies such as Word Lists, Repetition and use of a Dictionary are useful; however, they seldom result in ongoing motivation or a contextually based learning experience (Daskalovska, 2018; Merga & Ferguson, 2021).

The emphasis on reading for pleasure from a theoretical perspective addresses the cognitive and affective domains of reading. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1991), Csikszentmihalyi *et al.* (2005), reading for enjoyment is described as a flow state in which learners achieve a high level of immersion and intrinsic reward from that experience. The use of this concept in reading pedagogy has led to the conclusion that pleasure-based reading will result in a self-perpetuating habit of reading that contributes to lifelong learning (Boyask *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, Burnett and Merchant (2018) argued that affective encounters with texts generate enchantment, which motivates learners to persist in reading activities even when faced with linguistic challenges. These insights are particularly relevant for EFL learners, who often perceive reading in a foreign language as demanding; framing it as a pleasurable activity can reduce anxiety and increase motivation (McGeown *et al.*, 2012).

Within this theoretical and empirical landscape, the present study sets out to evaluate the pedagogical effectiveness of reading for pleasure as a strategy to foster vocabulary development in English as a foreign language among undergraduate students of the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages program at Universidad Técnica de Manabí. The research is composed of two complementary strands, namely (1) semi-structured interviews of 10 English teachers categorized into three thematic blocks (the manner in which they treat reading, how they view reading as a means of introducing students to new vocabulary, as well as views on vocabulary acquisition) and (2) a survey of 120 undergraduate students that consisted of 20 structured questions regarding their reading habits and preferences, along with their understanding of the benefits of reading. By placing this dual purpose, this research will situate itself at the intersection of educational theory and practice, allowing for an exploration of existing challenges faced by educators in local contexts while contributing to the global conversation regarding reading for enjoyment and vocabulary growth. In doing so, it advocates for the institutionalization of voluntary reading programs in higher education, thereby fostering a culture of reading that supports both linguistic competence and holistic development (Boyask *et al.*, 2023; Burnett & Merchant, 2018; Krashen, 2004).

Methodology

The methodological framework of this study was designed to provide a clear and replicable structure for examining the role of reading for pleasure in vocabulary development in English as a foreign language. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to capture both measurable outcomes and contextualized experiences. This design is consistent with Snyder (2019), who highlights the importance of methodological pluralism in educational research, especially when addressing complex constructs such as reading motivation and vocabulary acquisition.

The research was descriptive, analytical, and explanatory. By providing the opportunity to understand various characteristics of the students' reading habits along with their approaches to building vocabulary through descriptive analysis, the study also identified relationships between voluntary readings and vocabulary expansion through analytical assessment. The study generated educational implications for the relationships identified between these variables using explanatory analysis, placing the results in larger theoretical contexts of reading motivation and acquisition of language (Schiefele & *et al.*; 2012; Wang & *et al.*; 2020).

The study population consisted of 120 students enrolled in the eighth semester of the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages program at Universidad Técnica de Manabí, distributed across three academic sections (A, B, and C). This population was selected because it represents a critical stage in professional training, where mastery of English vocabulary is fundamental for meeting curricular requirements and for future teaching practice. Every student from every section was included in the study; therefore, the results represent a broad spectrum of varied reading experiences and trajectories of vocabulary growth. This is important because many large-scale studies of reading motivation and literacy, such as Guthrie *et al.* (2010) and Petscher (2009), use

very broad samples to identify patterns of reading across many populations.

In addition to student surveys, interviews were conducted with 10 English language teachers within the same teacher preparation program. The teachers participated in semi-structured interviews that used a set of 16 open-ended questions divided into three thematic categories: reading as it relates to vocabulary growth, reading as an induction to vocabulary and vocabulary. Teachers provided rich detail about their teaching practices, challenges, and perceptions, as well as the approaches they believe reading for pleasure leads to vocabulary development. The information gained from teachers was then triangulated with data from students to increase validity and contextualize findings in the larger educational setting. The data collection included surveys and structured instruments. The first part of data collection involved a survey with 20 closed-ended questions that focused on the students' reading habits and frequency of reading, types of voluntary reading materials, and their perceived benefits related to vocabulary acquisition.

In addition, half-structured interviews were conducted with ten educators to gain qualitative data about educational practices associated with reading and vocabulary education to augment quantitative data gathered through surveys. This combined method of data collection via both surveys and interviews follows Thorne (2008) who indicated that integrating structured (surveys) and unstructured/narrative (interview) data may enhance interpretive descriptions by providing both measurable trends and individual lived experiences. Both the validity and reliability of the data collected were carefully considered. The survey instrument was validated by a team of experts in the field of applied linguistics and pedagogy to provide assurance of content validity. Reliability was established via pilot-testing of the survey instrument, producing a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87, which demonstrates adequate internal consistency. This level of reliability is consistent with the benchmark standards for conducting research in educational psychology, provided by Bentler (1990) and Browne and Cudeck (1992), who stress the necessity for strong statistical indicators when assessing the validity of structural equation models. The interview protocol was validated by a panel of experts to assure clarity and relevance of all questions as well as to produce data that may lead to meaningful responses from the participants. Data analysis was conducted in two phases. For the first phase, the quantitative data collected using the survey instrument was analyzed by descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages), for the total sample of 120 students representing the three academic disciplines. This allowed for meaningful comparisons and identification of trends in reading practices and vocabulary development. Qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed through thematic coding, identifying recurrent themes related to reading practices, motivational factors, and vocabulary learning strategies. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings allowed for triangulation, enhancing the validity of the conclusions. The approach taken here follows the methodology used in second-language acquisition research, where using mixed methods has provided richer understanding of how learners behave (Grabe, 2009).

In conclusion, the methodology will yield sufficient and thorough information regarding the use of reading for enjoyment as an instruction strategy to help students gain vocabulary. This study will accomplish this through the combined use of quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews) data, the validation of instruments being utilized, measurement of the reliability of observations, and an analysis of the three course sections and ten teacher participants included in this study. Consequently, this study demonstrates methodology that is rigorous and replicable. This framework strengthens the credibility of the findings and situates the study within the broader discourse on reading motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and EFL pedagogy.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study combine two complementary strands of evidence: the survey administered to 120 undergraduate students and the semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 English teachers from the Pedagogy of National and Foreign Languages program at Universidad Técnica de Manabí. The combined results of these two projects yield a detailed portrayal of how people read, what they like to read, and how they see the benefits of reading for enjoyment as connected to the development of their English vocabulary when learning another language.

The data from the student surveys provide quantitative information about how often students read, the types of literature they prefer, the platforms from which they access literature, and how often students believe reading will improve their vocabulary. The quantitative data show some strengths in terms of how many people in this group are using the internet to access literature, and some weaknesses in how much literature students read each year (the average number of books read by students in this sample is 10; however, many students have read no books this year) and how few students are participating in reading groups or going to authors' events. Teachers' interviews, categorized into three broad themes (how teachers treat reading, how teachers view

reading as a way to build vocabulary, and how teachers define vocabulary) add qualitative depth to the interpretation of the quantitative data. Teachers commented on the motivational and lexical potential of reading for pleasure; however, they pointed out barriers to this potential in the form of institutional neglect, student unwillingness to read, and the students' preference for rote learning. These themes provide illustrative examples of scaffolding strategies, contextual vocabulary learning, and cooperative methods that facilitate the establishment of a lifelong reading culture.

By including input from both students and teachers, the findings provide a layered view of pleasure reading in the Ecuadorian EFL context. This combined evidence serves to provide additional validation to the conclusions and further places the results within the context of larger theoretical and empirical debates about literacy, motivation, and vocabulary development. The tables below present the results from the survey instrument organized by the first five questions displayed first along with an explanation and discussion that pertain to those results and are substantiated with appropriate literature.

Table 1. Frequency of Reading for Pleasure

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Frequent	37	30.8
Occasional	43	35.8
Never	40	33.3

The data reveal that one-third of students never engage in reading for pleasure, while the majority are divided between frequent and occasional readers. This finding is consistent with Greaney (1980), who emphasized that recreational reading frequency is a strong predictor of literacy achievement. Petscher (2009) further confirmed that attitudes toward reading correlate directly with academic performance. The absence of voluntary reading among a significant group of students may hinder incidental vocabulary acquisition, which is crucial in EFL contexts.

Table 2. Preferred Genres of Reading

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Narrative	30	25.0
Expository	55	45.8
Digital	35	29.2

Expository texts are the most preferred genre, suggesting that students seek informative or academic materials. However, Nell (1988) argued that narrative texts foster immersion and aesthetic gratification, which enhance incidental vocabulary acquisition. The interest in digital texts reflects contemporary trends identified by Kucirkova et al. (2017), who highlighted the motivational potential of digital reading environments. These results suggest that pedagogical strategies should diversify genres to engage different student profiles.

Table 3. Perceived Benefits of Reading for Pleasure

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Vocabulary	30	25.0
Comprehension	25	20.8
Writing	32	26.7
Speaking	33	27.5

Students recognize multiple benefits, with vocabulary acquisition, writing, and speaking being the most prominent. Gardner (2004) demonstrated that repeated exposure to words in varied contexts facilitates lexical learning. Sullivan and Brown (2015) confirmed that voluntary reading contributes significantly to academic progress across disciplines. The acknowledgment of benefits in both written and oral production indicates that reading for pleasure impacts not only comprehension but also language output, which is essential in foreign language learning.

Table 4. Frequency of Reading (Time-Based)

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	27	22.5

Weekly	32	26.7
Monthly	24	20.0
Rarely	37	30.8

Although a group of students maintains daily reading habits, most engage weekly or sporadically. Wang and Guthrie (2004) demonstrated that the amount of reading is directly related to comprehension outcomes. Schaffner et al. (2013) identified that reading volume mediates the relationship between motivation and achievement. The relatively low proportion of daily readers highlights the need for institutional programs that encourage consistent reading practices.

Table 5. Voluntary Reading in English

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	53	44.2
No	67	55.8

More than half of the students do not engage in voluntary reading in English, limiting their exposure to authentic vocabulary. Krashen (2004) argued that free voluntary reading is the most powerful tool for language acquisition. Jeon and Day (2016) confirmed through meta-analysis that extensive reading improves English proficiency. The lack of voluntary reading in English represents a significant obstacle to achieving the proficiency levels required in higher education.

Table 6. Average Time Spent Reading

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<30 minutes	34	28.3
30–60 min	27	22.5
1–2 hours	32	26.7
>2 hours	27	22.5

As can be seen from the data collected, the majority of students engage in reading between thirty minutes and the maximum two hours allowed; however, a small percentage of students read longer than two hours per session. Day et al. (1998) highlighted how critical it is for students to have a lot of time with texts to improve their vocabulary. Furthermore, Grabe (2009) stated that reading in prolonged timeframes gives readers a much better chance to learn something incidentally because they have more to draw upon than if they were only reading short books or articles. Based on the average amount of time spent reading, there appears to be some variation among students in terms of how long they stay engaged, thus reinforcing the necessity of implementing programs that promote longer-length and meaningful reading experiences.

Table 7. Attitudes Toward Reading for Pleasure

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	24	20.0
Agree	29	24.2
Neutral	25	20.8
Disagree	21	17.5
Strongly Disagree	21	17.5

Nearly half of the students expressed agreement or strong agreement with the value of reading for pleasure, while a notable minority disagreed. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) highlighted that positive attitude toward reading are strongly linked to motivation and achievement. Becker et al. (2010) confirmed that intrinsic motivation predicts literacy growth. The presence of neutral and negative attitudes indicates that institutional efforts are needed to foster a stronger culture of voluntary reading.

Table 8. Use of Reading Strategies

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Always	23	19.2
Often	26	21.7

Sometimes	19	15.8
Rarely	23	19.2
Never	29	24.2

Recent research indicates that many learners do not employ reading strategies on a regular basis; also, about one-fourth of the population does not utilize any strategies at all. McCarthy (1990) asserts that the application of strategy is crucial for successful education in a second language. According to Daskalovska (2018), reading strategies such as using context to guess the meaning of an unfamiliar word and consulting a dictionary aid learner in acquiring new vocabulary from extensive reading. With so few students demonstrating regular use of reading strategies, there is a significant gap in instruction that must be remedied through direct teaching of these strategies.

Table 9. Preferred Reading Formats

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Printed Books	35	29.2
E-books	49	40.8
Audiobooks	36	30.0

E-books are the most preferred format, followed by audiobooks and printed books. This reflects the growing influence of digital platforms in reading practices. Kucirkova and Cremin (2018) argued that digital libraries enhance engagement by aligning texts with learners' interests. Zhu et al. (2024) confirmed that digital reading environments can effectively support vocabulary acquisition. The preference for audiobooks also suggests multimodal learning opportunities, consistent with Vandergrift (2007), who highlighted the role of listening in vocabulary development.

Table 10. Sources of Reading Materials

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
School Library	25	20.8
Online	33	27.5
Bookstore	33	27.5
Friends	29	24.2

Students primarily access reading materials online and through bookstores, with fewer relying on school libraries or peers. This finding resonates with Guthrie et al. (2010), who emphasized the importance of access to diverse reading materials in fostering motivation. The reliance on online sources reflects global trends in digital literacy (Kucirkova & Cremin, 2020). The relatively low use of school libraries suggests a need to strengthen institutional resources to support voluntary reading.

Table 11. Reading in English Outside of Class

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	55	45.8
No	65	54.2

Nearly half of the students reported reading in English outside of class, while a slight majority do not. Krashen (2004) emphasized that voluntary reading beyond formal instruction is one of the most effective ways to acquire vocabulary. Jeon and Day (2016) confirmed that extensive reading programs significantly improve proficiency. The lack of extracurricular reading among many students highlights the need for institutional encouragement to extend reading practices beyond the classroom.

Table 12. Number of Books Read per Year

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1–2	109	90.8
3–5	8	6.7
6–10	2	1.7
>10	1	0.8

The overwhelming majority of students (over 90%) reported reading only 1–2 books per year, while very few read more than 5. Day et al. 1998) argued that extensive reading requires a substantial number of texts to be effective, while Nation (2001) stressed that repeated encounters across multiple texts are essential for vocabulary growth. The scarcity of students reading more than 10 books annually highlights a critical gap in reading practices that must be addressed through institutional initiatives promoting sustained and varied reading.

Table 13. Participation in Reading Clubs or Groups

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	5	4.2
No	115	95.8

Only a very small minority of students (4.2%) participate in reading clubs or groups, while nearly all do not. Guthrie et al. (2010) highlighted that social context of reading enhance motivation and comprehension, and Boyask et al. (2021) argued that collective reading practices contribute to educational well-being and foster a culture of literacy. The near absence of collaborative reading activities among students indicates a lack of institutional or community structures to support shared reading experiences. Strengthening reading clubs could provide both motivational and social benefits, encouraging students to engage more actively with texts.

Table 14. Language Preference for Reading

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
English	29	24.2
Spanish	43	35.8
Both	48	40.0

Most students like to read in English and Spanish, but many students only like to read in Spanish. This is due to the fact that they want to keep their native literacy skills while they learn another language. Cummins (2000) stated that if you already know how to read and write in your first language, you will learn how to read and write in a second language at a faster rate. Only a small percentage of students read only in English, which means that they are usually not reading as much as possible (in terms of amount of material being read) in their second language. This will likely slow the development of their vocabulary.

Table 15. Use of Online Platforms for Reading

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	100	83.3
No	20	16.7

The vast majority of students (over 80%) reported using online platforms for reading, while only a small minority do not. Kucirkova and Cremin (2020) emphasized that digital platforms can personalize reading experiences and increase learner engagement. Zhu *et al.* (2024) confirmed that digital reading supports vocabulary acquisition when learners employ strategies such as contextual guessing and repeated exposure. The high reliance on online platforms suggests that digital literacy is becoming central to students' reading habits, offering opportunities for multimodal learning and expanded access to texts. However, the minority who do not use online platforms may face limitations in exposure to diverse materials, highlighting the importance of ensuring equitable access to digital resources.

Table 16. Perceived Difficulty of Reading in English

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Easy	21	17.5
Easy	23	19.2
Moderate	27	22.5
Difficult	28	23.3
Very Difficult	21	17.5

Most students perceive reading in English as moderate to difficult, with only a minority finding it easy. Anderson and Freebody (1981) noted that perceived difficulty reduces motivation and engagement, while Schmitt (2008) emphasized that vocabulary load is often the main barrier in EFL reading comprehension. The balanced distribution here suggests that while some students feel confident, many struggle, highlighting the need for scaffolding strategies such as graded readers and vocabulary pre-teaching to reduce cognitive load.

Table 17. Reading Recommended by Teachers

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	100	83.3
No	20	16.7

A large majority of students (over 80%) reported receiving reading recommendations from teachers. Guthrie et al. (2010) emphasized that teacher guidance is a crucial factor in motivating students to read. Krashen (2004) also argued that teacher-selected texts provide accessible input that supports language acquisition. The strong presence of teacher recommendations here contrasts with contexts where guidance is absent, suggesting that institutional practices are actively encouraging voluntary reading.

Table 18. Reading Encouraged by Family

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	30	25.0
No	90	75.0

Only one-quarter of students reported family encouragement to read, while three-quarters did not. Clark and Rumbold (2006) emphasized that family support is a strong predictor of reading motivation. Baker and Scher (2002) found that parental involvement fosters positive attitudes toward reading. The lack of family encouragement in this context contrasts sharply with studies showing its importance, suggesting that institutional support must compensate for limited home reinforcement.

Table 19. Participation in Literary Events

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	20	16.7
No	100	83.3

Only a small minority of students reported participating in literary events such as book fairs or reading contests, while the vast majority did not. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) argued that participation in literacy-related events enhances motivation and engagement. The limited involvement here contrasts with contexts where cultural enrichment through reading events is common. Expanding access to such events could strengthen the reading culture and provide authentic contexts for vocabulary development.

Table 20. Peer Influence on Reading

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	20	16.7
No	100	83.3

Only a small minority of students reported being influenced by peers in their reading choices, while the vast majority did not. Ryan and Deci (2000) highlighted that peer influence is a significant factor in shaping motivation and engagement in educational contexts. The near absence of peer-driven reading practices here contrasts with studies showing the importance of social networks in fostering literacy. Strengthening peer-led initiatives, such as reading circles, could enhance motivation and collaborative learning.

Results of Teacher Interviews

The semi-structured interviews with 10 English teachers were organized into three thematic blocks:

- Treatment of Reading
- Reading as Induction to Vocabulary
- Vocabulary

Each block contained guiding questions (16 total). Below, the responses are presented in tables, followed by extended analysis.

Block 1: Treatment of Reading

Table 21. Teachers' Perceptions of Reading Importance

Teacher	Response Summary
T1	Reading is essential for motivation.
T2	Reading builds comprehension skills.
T3	Reading is undervalued by students.
T4	Reading should be daily practice.
T5	Reading is key to cultural exposure.
T6	Reading is not prioritized institutionally.
T7	Reading supports writing development.
T8	Reading is enjoyable but neglected.
T9	Reading is central to language learning.
T10	Reading is often replaced by digital media.

Teachers unanimously acknowledged the importance of reading, but several lamented its undervaluation by students and institutions. This dynamic demonstrates the tension found in the work of Guthrie and colleagues (2010), who asserted that motivation and access are key components in developing reading behaviours. In particular, this difference in focus on daily practice (T4, T9) versus lack of institutional support (T6) now highlights a mismatch between the beliefs of teachers and the support provided by their respective systems. The validation of reading as both a form of cultural exposure (T5) and as a source of enjoyment (T8) correlates with the perspective of Nell (1988), who described reading as providing aesthetic enjoyment. The change in reading habits to predominantly digital media (T10) indicates a shift in literacy behaviour, as evidenced by work of Kucirkova and Cremin (2020), who have observed an increase in the use of digital mediums.

Table 22. Frequency of Reading Activities in Class

Teacher	Response Summary
T1	Weekly reading tasks.
T2	Daily short readings.
T3	Occasional, depending on syllabus.
T4	Weekly, linked to vocabulary.
T5	Rarely, due to time constraints.
T6	Weekly, but not systematic.
T7	Daily, integrated into lessons.
T8	Weekly, with student choice.
T9	Rarely, replaced by grammar.
T10	Weekly, digital texts.

In terms of regularity, the frequency with which teachers/peers are integrating reading into their reading practices generally exhibited considerable variability, ranging from daily integration (T2, T7) to infrequent use (T5, T9). The variability in usage correlates with student survey results in Table 4, which show that many of the students have described irregular reading habits. Day et al. (1998) state that for extensive reading to achieve effective results, it must take place on a regular basis; Schaffner et al. (2013) further state that the amount of reading can mediate students' motivation and achievements. Teachers who integrate daily reading (T2, T7) embody best practices, but the reliance on grammar (T9) or syllabus constraints (T3) reflects traditional pedagogical priorities that may limit vocabulary growth.

Block 2: Reading as Induction to Vocabulary

Table 23. Reading as a Source of Vocabulary

Teacher	Response
	Summary
T1	Reading provides authentic vocabulary.
T2	Vocabulary is better learned in context.
T3	Students struggle with unknown words.
T4	Reading expands lexical repertoire.
T5	Vocabulary acquisition is incidental.
T6	Reading helps retention of words.
T7	Students avoid difficult texts.
T8	Reading supports speaking vocabulary.
T9	Vocabulary learning is natural in reading.
T10	Reading is more effective than memorization.

Teachers consistently recognized reading as a primary source of vocabulary acquisition. Various sources of contextual learning were reported as helping learners acquire new languages (T2, T9), which agrees with Krashen's (2004) opinion that free reading is the most effective way of acquiring a new language. Various sources provided evidence of incidental learning supporting Nation's (2001) assertion that vocabulary can be acquired unconsciously or inadvertently through repeated exposure. However, it was noted that learners struggle with unknown vocabulary (T3) and avoid reading difficult material (T7), which parallels the findings of Schmitt (2008) on lexical barriers. The recognition that reading supports speaking vocabulary (T8) expands the scope of benefits beyond comprehension, resonating with Sullivan and Brown (2015), who linked voluntary reading to broader academic progress.

Table 24. Strategies for Vocabulary Learning through Reading

Teacher	Response Summary
T1	Encourage dictionary use.
T2	Teach contextual guessing.
T3	Highlight key words.
T4	Use glossaries.
T5	Promote peer discussion.
T6	Encourage note-taking.
T7	Scaffold with pre-reading.
T8	Use bilingual texts.
T9	Focus on high-frequency words.
T10	Encourage repeated exposure.

Teachers reported diverse strategies, ranging from dictionary use (T1) to contextual guessing (T2) and scaffolding (T7). McCarthy (1990) emphasized that strategy training is essential for effective language learning, while Daskalovska (2018) confirmed that contextual guessing enhances vocabulary acquisition. The use of bilingual texts (T8) reflects Cummins' (2000) interdependence hypothesis, which argues that first-language literacy supports second-language acquisition. Peer discussion (T5) and note-taking (T6) highlight collaborative and metacognitive approaches, consistent with Guthrie et al. (2010), who stressed the role of instructional support in motivation.

Block 3: Vocabulary

Table 25. Challenges in Vocabulary Acquisition

Teacher	Response Summary
T1	Students lack motivation.
T2	Vocabulary load is overwhelming.
T3	Students rely on memorization.
T4	Limited exposure to authentic texts.
T5	Students avoid difficult words.

T6	Lack of institutional support.
T7	Students forget quickly.
T8	Vocabulary teaching is fragmented.
T9	Students lack strategies.
T10	Students depend on translation.

Teachers identified multiple challenges, including lack of motivation (T1), reliance on memorization (T3), and dependence on translation (T10). According to Schmitt (2008), the primary barrier in an EFL context is the burden of vocabulary load. To retain vocabulary, Nation (2001) stated that we need repeated contact with it. Both limited exposure to authentic written texts (T4) and the fragmentation of vocabulary teaching (T8) indicate larger systemic problems within institutions, which are also consistent with the institutional neglect identified in Block 1. The survey data in Table 16 show that a large number of students have difficulty reading in English.

Table 26. Effective Practices for Vocabulary Development

Teacher	Response Summary
T1	Extensive reading.
T2	Use of graded readers.
T3	Vocabulary notebooks.
T4	Peer collaboration.
T5	Integration with writing.
T6	Multimedia resources.
T7	Frequent exposure.
T8	Teacher scaffolding.
T9	Student choice of texts.
T10	Contextual learning.

Teachers emphasized extensive reading (T1), scaffolding (T8), and contextual learning (T10) as effective practices. Day *et al.* (1998) and Krashen (2004) both argued that extensive reading is central to vocabulary growth. The use of graded readers (T2) addresses the difficulty barrier identified earlier, while vocabulary notebooks (T3) and peer collaboration (T4) highlight practical strategies for retention and engagement. Multimedia resources (T6) reflect modern approaches, consistent with Kucirkova and Cremin (2020), who emphasized digital literacy. The emphasis on student choice (T9) aligns with Guthrie *et al.* (2010), who found that autonomy increases motivation.

The interviews with teachers revealed a strong consensus on the importance of reading for pleasure, yet they also highlighted systemic neglect and inconsistent classroom practices. While some teachers integrate daily reading activities, others admitted that reading is overshadowed by grammar-focused instruction or syllabus constraints. This sudden unpredictability in performance echoes the work of Guthrie *et al.* (2010), who stated that independent reading and balanced instruction serve as critical pathways for the development of literacy. Similarly, Clark and Rumbold (2006) found that there is an essential need for institutions to support reading as a culture through their actions. Collins *et al.* (2022) showed that when an institution lacks commitment to a whole-school approach to reading, success will not be achieved through this approach. The survey participants echoed the inconsistency of benefits identified from reading, demonstrating limited participation in reading clubs and literary events. Nell (1988) highlighted that there needs to be some level of psychological satisfaction to engage in independent reading for pleasure; meanwhile, Boyask *et al.* (2021) emphasized the social benefit of reading to improve overall contribution to society. In Ecuador, Gonzalez Reyes *et al.* (2018) and Peña Ledesma (2024) demonstrated the existence of national educational policies that have ambitious literacy targets (B1 at secondary; B2 at university); however, the policies fail to include programming that supports voluntary reading. This lack of parallel programming between the goals for literacy and national programming for independent reading helps to explain why, from the perspective of the teachers in this study, the institution as a whole devalues reading, even though they are aware of the benefits of teaching students how to read. Krashen (2004) states that the best source for increasing vocabulary is by reading freely because it provides not only lots of practice and repetitions but also real-life examples of how words are used. Gardner (2004) found that by using a lot of reading material, learners will encounter the same word many times, and Ghanbari

& Marzban (2014) found evidence that using methods of incidental vocabulary retention (i.e. retention of vocabulary that you are not learning on purpose) improves significantly when you have the opportunity to see or hear words over an extended period. Green (2020) found that both extensive reading and extensive viewing give students familiarization with academic vocabulary in multiple content areas, which supports the argument for the value of voluntary reading across all content areas.

Some challenges were identified within this study, including that many students expressed frustration with unknown vocabulary, and that many teachers indicated that they frequently avoided using complex texts when teaching vocabulary. Schmitt (2008) and Nation (2001) found that one major barrier for EFL learners is their ability to learn and remember vocabulary because of the high level of lexical load presented during English language learning, which requires scaffolding support structures (e.g. glossaries, pre-reading, guided reading). Daskalovska (2018) highlighted the effectiveness of contextual guessing and dictionary use, strategies that teachers in our study actively promoted. Arai (2022) added that perceived difficulty directly affects flow experiences, reducing enjoyment and persistence. Survey data revealed that many students still rely on rote memorization or translation. This reliance contrasts with Wang and Zhang's (2025) evidence that vocabulary breadth and depth mutually reinforce reading comprehension, and Binder *et al.* (2017) highlighted how vocabulary depth is critical to competent reading ability. It is imperative that education workspace interventions move away from just mechanical approaches to real authentic interaction with the content of texts. Vogrinčič Čepič *et al* (2024), in their analysis of the literature on the subject, reiterated this by stating that reading for fun must be positioned within a contextual framework to maximize vocabulary acquisition.

Teachers also noted various reasons why there are obstacles to vocabulary acquisition: lack of interest, fragmented teaching style, and reliance on a translation. Becker *et al.* (2010) demonstrated that intrinsic motivation predicts literacy growth better than external motivation. Further, McGeown *et al.* (2012) state that individuals who are poor readers often do not have intrinsic motivation, which leads to avoidance behaviors, which helps to explain why many of our respondents have perceived English reading as difficult.

Establishing a practice of voluntary reading in Higher Education in Ecuador would provide significant advantages in vocabulary development and enhance students' socio-emotional wellbeing, based upon the evidence available internationally (Krashen, 2004; Mak & Fancourt, 2020a, 2020b; Sullivan & Brown, 2015;). By establishing voluntary reading at the intersection of cognitive, affective, and institutional domains, Ecuadorian colleges and universities have the potential to create a culture of reading that will promote both linguistic competence and holistic development.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study highlight the importance of institutionalizing reading for pleasure within Ecuadorian higher education as a means of strengthening vocabulary development in English as a foreign language. Universities should establish formal programs that encourage voluntary reading, such as reading clubs, literary events, and collaborations with libraries. These initiatives would help foster a sustainable reading culture and provide students with opportunities to engage with texts beyond the classroom.

Curricular design must also embed extensive reading as a structured component of EFL pedagogy. By incorporating graded readers and authentic texts into the syllabus, students can gain systematic exposure to vocabulary in meaningful contexts. This approach not only enhances incidental vocabulary retention but also promotes deeper comprehension and long-term learning.

Teachers play a crucial role in supporting students' reading experiences. They should provide structured guidance through pre-reading activities, vocabulary notebooks, glossaries, and strategies for contextual guessing. Such scaffolding reduces anxiety, helps learners manage the lexical load, and increases their willingness to engage with challenging texts.

Equipping students with tools to manage vocabulary demands is essential for reducing avoidance behaviors and fostering persistence. When learners feel confident in their ability to handle complex texts, they are more likely to remain motivated and committed to the reading process.

Finally, digital reading environments offer valuable opportunities to expand access and autonomy. Universities should invest in curated digital libraries that allow students to select texts according to their interests. Personalized digital collections can enhance motivation, encourage independent reading habits, and support vocabulary growth in flexible and engaging ways.

These recommendations advocate for a comprehensive approach that integrates institutional support, curricular innovation, teacher guidance, and digital resources. Together, these measures can strengthen

vocabulary acquisition, promote a culture of reading for pleasure, and contribute to the holistic development of university students in Ecuador.

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We, Steeven Josue Valencia Cedeño, Yliana Consuelo Villacis Lascano, Miguel Macías Loor, José Rolando Intriago Macías, and Karina Luzdelia Mendoza Bravo, authors of the indicated manuscript, DECLARE that we have contributed directly to its intellectual content, as well as to the genesis and analysis of its data; therefore, we are in a position to be made publicly responsible for it and accept that our names appear in the list of authors in the indicated order. We also declare that the ethical requirements of the aforementioned publication have been met, having consulted the Declaration of Ethics and Malpractice in Publication.

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