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Aligning CEFR E-Graded Readers with EFL Learners' Reading Proficiency: A Mixed-Methods Study from West Sulawesi, Indonesia

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46245/ijorer.v6i4.935>

Sections Info

Article history:

Submitted: June 14, 2025

Final Revised: July 19, 2025

Accepted: July 25, 2025

Published: July 31, 2025

Keywords:

CEFR; E-graded Readers,
 Extensive Reading; EFL
 Learners; Reading Proficiency



ABSTRACT

This study investigates the alignment of CEFR-levelled e-graded readers with the reading proficiency of West Sulawesi EFL learners and the challenges encountered during an extensive reading program using the e-graded readers. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative data. 85 undergraduate learners from the English Education Study Program were the participants of this study. All learners were enrolled in an Extensive Reading course that incorporated CEFR-aligned e-graded readers accessed through the platform <https://english-e-reader.net>. The findings show a moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.659$) between CEFR levels and reading test scores, with higher levels associated with better performance. The results indicate significant differences in test scores across levels, $F(4, 80) = 21.95$, $p < 0.001$, with B1, B1+ and B2 learners outperforming those at A1 and A2. Qualitative data highlight comprehension difficulties, particularly with idiomatic expressions and cultural references. Learners also suggested incorporating interactive features and collaborative learning to improve engagement and motivation. The study concludes that enhancing scaffolding strategies, interactive elements and assessments can improve the effectiveness of E-Graded Readers in extensive reading program for EFL learners in West Sulawesi, Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

In the digital transformation era, education systems worldwide increasingly incorporate technology to enhance learning outcomes (Grabe & Stoller, 2013). Language education, in particular, has benefited significantly from technological advancements, with digital tools providing innovative ways to improve language proficiency. Among these tools, e-graded readers have emerged as a popular method for supporting extensive reading programs in language learning contexts (De Lozier, 2019). These digital versions of graded readers, designed to match learners' proficiency levels (Morabit Nadir, 2021), offer an engaging and flexible approach to improving reading skills.

Extensive reading has long been acknowledged as a significant factor in improving language proficiency, as it promotes better comprehension, vocabulary expansion, and overall language skills (Day & Bamford, 1998; Taye & Teshome, 2025). It encourages learners to read large quantities of material at their level of comfort, enhancing reading fluency and fostering a positive attitude toward reading in a foreign language. Unlike intensive reading, which focuses on short texts and detailed analysis, extensive reading exposes learners to varied sentence structures, vocabulary, and overall language use in context. Nishino (2007) highlights that Japanese high school learners who engaged in extensive reading showed marked improvement in both reading comprehension and writing abilities, demonstrating the multifaceted benefits of this approach. Integrating digital tools such as e-graded readers can potentially amplify these benefits, making reading more engaging and accessible.



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E-graded readers are specifically designed to accommodate various language proficiency levels, making them suitable for learners at different stages of their language journey (Azmuiddin et al., 2019). They feature controlled vocabulary, sentence structures, and topics to match the learner's proficiency level, typically ranging from beginner to advanced levels. Research has shown that e-graded readers can effectively aid vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension, supporting the goals of extensive reading programs (Kara, 2019; Nishino, 2007). Additionally, the interactive features of e-readers, such as instant dictionary access and audio support, contribute to a deeper understanding of reading material and cater to diverse learning styles and preferences (Noori, 2025).

STAIN Majene, a higher education institution in West Sulawesi, Indonesia, serves learners primarily from regional and rural areas. As part of its mission to enhance English language proficiency, the institution has been exploring new tools and strategies to support language learning. However, the integration of e-graded readers into the curriculum, specifically for extensive reading activities, is a relatively new approach within this context. The institution aims to provide learners with access to appropriately levelled reading materials to improve their reading comprehension, but initial observations indicate challenges with the effectiveness of the CEFR-aligned levels.

At STAIN Majene, learners in the English Education program participate in an extensive reading class that utilizes e-graded readers available through the platform <https://english-e-reader.net>. This class is designed to enhance learners' reading skills by providing them with access to texts that are appropriately graded to their language proficiency levels. The use of CEFR-aligned e-graded readers ensures that learners read materials that are neither too easy nor too difficult, allowing them to improve their reading comprehension in a structured yet flexible manner. However, preliminary classroom observations suggest that while some learners enjoyed the reading process, others struggled to comprehend their assigned e-graded readers, raising concerns about the appropriateness of the assigned materials for these learners.

Several studies have explored the effectiveness of e-graded readers and extensive reading programs in language learning. Nation & Waring (2019) argue that extensive reading fosters incidental vocabulary acquisition, a key benefit of using graded readers. However, they emphasize that selecting the appropriate level is critical to ensuring successful learning outcomes. Macalister (2015) found that New Zealand EFL learners using e-graded readers demonstrated higher reading motivation and engagement than those using traditional printed materials. However, digital reading posed challenges related to screen fatigue and distractions. Additionally, Park (2016) conducted an experiment with Korean university learners, showing that e-graded readers with interactive features (e.g., dictionaries and audio) significantly improved reading fluency and comprehension compared to static PDFs.

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Although many digital reading platforms promote CEFR-aligned leveling, research indicates that labeled CEFR levels may misalign with learners' actual comprehension abilities. For example, Reiber-Kuijpers et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of digital L2 reading environments and highlighted that readers' proficiency and task nature, rather than CEFR labels alone, strongly influence reading outcomes. Similarly, Gopal et al. (2023) analyzed Malaysian secondary learners using CEFR-aligned texts and found persistent reading miscues and comprehension gaps,



suggesting that digital placement based solely on CEFR labels can be unreliable. These findings suggest that while CEFR-aligned e-graded readers provide structured language learning opportunities, their effectiveness in accurately matching learners' abilities, especially in suburb area like West Sulawesi requires further investigation.

Given these concerns, this study seeks to explore the alignment between CEFR-level e-graded readers and the actual reading proficiency of Indonesian EFL learners in a regional institution. Specifically, the study will address the following research questions:

1. How accurately do CEFR-levelled e-graded readers match the reading proficiency of West Sulawesi EFL learners?
2. What benefits and challenges do learners face when engaging with digital extensive reading materials?
3. How do these challenges impact learners' reading development and motivation?

This study aims to explore how CEFR-levelled e-graded readers align with the reading proficiency of Indonesian EFL learners and to identify the challenges learners faced in Suburb settings during the extensive reading program.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2013), integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the alignment between CEFR-levelled e-graded readers and learners' actual reading comprehension, as well as their experiences using digital reading tools.

The participants were 85 undergraduate learners from the English Education Study Program at STAIN Majene, a regional higher education institution in West Sulawesi, Indonesia. All learners were enrolled in an Extensive Reading course that incorporated CEFR-aligned e-graded readers accessed via the platform <https://english-e-reader.net>. This platform allowed learners to select and read English texts that matched their language proficiency and interests. Participants were selected using total population sampling, as all learners enrolled in the course were involved in the study. The study unfolded in four distinct yet interconnected phases:

Phase 1: Observing E-Graded Levels

In this phase, learners' reading development was observed through their weekly reading reports, which recorded the titles, levels, and frequency of books they read. These reports served as the primary instrument for identifying the highest CEFR level each learner achieved during the semester. The data helped establish how far learners progressed in choosing more challenging materials over time.

Phase 2: Measuring Reading Comprehension

This phase focused on evaluating how well learners understood the texts they had read. A reading comprehension test was developed using excerpts and content from the specific e-graded novels each learner had completed. The test assessed their grasp of plot, character development, thematic understanding, and inferencing. The reading test underwent expert validation by two TEFL lecturers. This contextualized approach ensured that learners were evaluated based on texts they were familiar with, providing a more authentic measure of their reading proficiency.



Phase 3: Investigating Learner Perceptions

In this phase, a structured questionnaire was distributed to collect learners' perceptions of the e-graded reader program. The instrument included both scaled and open-ended questions that explored ease of use, engagement, learning benefits, motivation, and preferences regarding reading modes (digital vs. printed).

Phase 4: In-Depth Qualitative Exploration

To enrich the data further, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a selected group of learners who represented various reading levels and perceptions. These interviews explored their reading habits, perceived gains, challenges encountered, and their views on using e-graded readers for language learning.

Quantitative data from comprehension test scores and e-reader level records were analyzed using descriptive statistics, a Pearson correlation, and a One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to explore pattern and relationship between CEFR Level and reading proficiency. For the qualitative data, an inductive thematic analysis was employed. All open-ended questionnaire responses and interview transcripts were manually coded and categorized based on recurring themes using an iterative coding process. This involved several steps, such as initial familiarization with the data, open coding to identify key phrases and concepts, and thematic categorization to group related codes under broader themes. The results from both data sets were integrated to provide a holistic understanding of how e-graded readers support learners' reading development in this regional Indonesian EFL context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study aimed to explore how CEFR-levelled e-graded readers from English-e-reader.net align with the reading proficiency of Indonesian EFL learners and to identify the challenges learners faced during the extensive reading program. The findings are based on both quantitative and qualitative data.

Quantitative Findings:

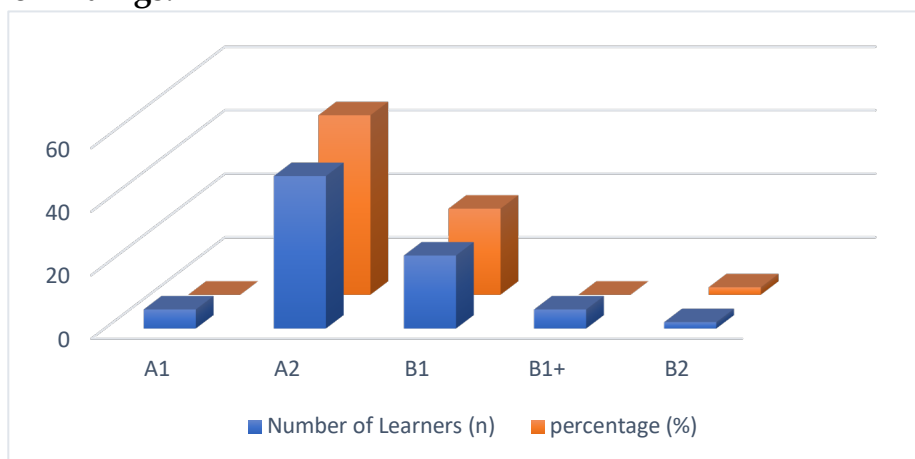


Figure 1. Distribution of learners by CEFR Level

Figure 1 reveals that most learners were reading at A2 level, with almost half at B1. A small portion had reached B1+ or B2, indicating stronger reading proficiency.



Table 1. Distribution of Reading Test Scores

Letter Grade	Number of Learners (n)	Percentage (%)
A	32	37,6
A-	11	12,9
B+	15	17,6
B	14	16,5
B-	6	7,1
C	7	8,23
Total	85	100

The table shows that a combined 50% of learners scored A or A-, suggesting overall strong reading comprehension, though performance varied by proficiency level.

Correlation Between CEFR Levels and Test Scores

To assess the alignment between CEFR levels and learners' reading proficiency, a Pearson correlation was calculated between learners' CEFR levels (as determined by the e-graded reader platform) and their reading test scores. The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.66$) indicates a moderate positive correlation, meaning that as learners' CEFR levels increase, their performance on the reading comprehension test also improves. This indicates that the program is effectively helping learners develop their reading skills in line with their proficiency level.

ANOVA Analysis of Test Scores Across CEFR Levels

A One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether there were statistically significant differences in reading comprehension scores across the various CEFR levels (A1, A2, B1, B1+, B2). The independent variable was the CEFR level, and the dependent variable was the reading comprehension score. The results of the ANOVA test were as follows:

$F(4, 80) = 21.95, p < 0.001, \text{Eta squared} = 0.52.$

This result indicates that there were significant differences in reading comprehension scores between the different CEFR levels, with higher-level learners (B1, B1+, B2) performing significantly better than lower-level learners (A1, A2). The effect size (Eta squared = 0.52) suggests that CEFR level accounts for a strong proportion of the variability in reading comprehension performance.

Post-Hoc Analysis (Tukey's HSD Test)

Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's Honest Significant Difference (HSD) test were performed to determine which specific groups differed from one another. The results indicated that:

- Learners at the B1, B1+ and B2 levels scored significantly higher than learners at the A1 and A2 levels ($p < 0.05$).
- No significant differences were found between the B1 and B2 levels or between the A1 and A2 levels.



Qualitative Findings:

The qualitative data collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews provided in-depth insights into learners' experiences, motivations, and challenges when engaging with CEFR-leveled e-graded readers from <https://english-e-reader.net>. The following themes emerged from the analysis of the learner responses:

1. Learner Engagement and Motivation

One of the most prominent themes in the learner responses was the importance of motivation in sustaining engagement with the e-reading program. Learners emphasized that the autonomy provided by the program in allowing them to choose books that matched their reading preferences significantly influenced their engagement and enjoyment of the reading process. This aligns with the principles of extensive reading, where self-selected reading has been shown to foster intrinsic motivation (Day & Bamford, 1998). Some learners noted:

"E-graded readers are very interesting to use and help me become more diligent and enthusiastic in reading."

"Reading became very enjoyable when I got the right materials. E-graded readers provide reading material suitable for English learners at the beginner level."

"I love it because there are so many interesting stories and easy access anytime and anywhere."

2. Vocabulary Development and Language Enrichment

Vocabulary acquisition was consistently cited as a benefit. Learners appreciated learning new words through exposure, not memorization. The repeated use of high-frequency and contextualized vocabulary in the stories made unfamiliar words more memorable.

"I found many new vocabularies and could understand them through the context."

"My vocabulary increased significantly because of reading graded materials at appropriate levels."

"I improved my vocabulary by reading and writing down new words and finding out their meanings later."

3. Improvement in Reading Comprehension and Fluency

Learners noted that their reading speed, confidence, and general understanding of texts had improved. Regular exposure to full-length stories and consistent engagement helped build fluency.

"I feel that my reading skills have improved through this program. I can understand the text faster than before."

"I feel my reading has become more fluent, and I don't feel afraid anymore to face long English texts."

4. Cross-Skill Benefits: Writing and Speaking

Many learners reflected on how their reading positively impacted other language skills. Writing improved as learners internalized grammatical structures, and speaking fluency developed through story retelling.



"This program helped my writing. I learned how to structure sentences better through the stories I read."

"Most of the assessment is retelling the story, so I tried to retell the stories out loud, and it helped my speaking."

These outcomes indicate the integrative potential of extensive reading using E-graded readers, confirming that reading influences receptive and productive skills alike.

5. Cultural Awareness and Intercultural Insight

A significant number of learners noted that reading the e-graded materials from English-e-reader.net helped them gain a deeper understanding of Western culture, particularly regarding social class, family structures, education and the Justice system. Some learners commented:

"I learned a lot about social class and the way people lived in the past through stories like Sherlock Holmes. It's interesting to see how people thought in those times."

"I learned many Western habits and ways of thinking from the characters."

This echoes studies showing that literature can serve as a powerful medium for cultural exposure and critical thinking.

6. Challenges and Limitations

Many learners shared the difficulties they encountered while participating in the extensive reading program using E-graded readers. These challenges could be grouped into three categories: linguistic/cultural comprehension difficulties, platform-related technical issues, and general digital distractions.

a. Linguistic and Cultural Comprehension Difficulties

Another central theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis was the difficulty some learners faced in understanding certain aspects of the texts, particularly when the language or cultural references were unfamiliar. Many learners reported struggling with idiomatic expressions, colloquial language, and cultural context within the reading materials. A learner shared:

"Sometimes I don't get the meaning of certain phrases, like idioms, and it makes the story confusing. I wish there were explanations for these phrases."

These difficulties were especially pronounced for learners at the lower CEFR levels (A1, A2), suggesting that the texts may be too complex for their current language proficiency, which aligns with the quantitative findings that showed learners at lower proficiency levels scoring lower on reading comprehension tests. It highlights that even the e-reading platform provides a built-in dictionary, more comprehensive scaffolding from the instructor to clarify the cultural context is needed by particular learners (A1 and A2) to overcome the comprehension barriers.

b. Platform-Specific Technical Barriers

Some learners also reported issues specific to the E-graded reader platform. This included problems with accessing materials, downloading files, or system lags:

"Sometimes the file didn't open properly and had to be re-downloaded."



These technical obstacles, although not widespread, created friction in the learning process, potentially reducing consistency in reading habits.

c. General Mobile Device Distractions

In contrast to platform-specific issues, some learners noted that reading on mobile devices exposed them to distractions such as notifications and the temptation to switch apps.

"I often get distracted when reading on my phone, especially by notifications."

These distractions reflect a common challenge in digital learning environments, where maintaining focus can be difficult due to the multifunctional nature of mobile devices. This suggests a need for developing better digital self-regulation among learners.

7. Instructor Effectiveness and Support

The feedback regarding the effectiveness of instructors was generally positive, with learners appreciating the personalized reading recommendations and the engaging classroom environment created by their instructor/lecturer. Many learners mentioned that instructors who provided guidance on selecting appropriate reading materials based on their CEFR level helped them make more informed choices. One learner reflected:

"The lecturer helped me pick books that were not too difficult for my level, so I didn't feel overwhelmed. It really helped me stay motivated."

Moreover, learners emphasized the importance of having instructors who maintained a supportive atmosphere, where they felt comfortable discussing the texts and asking questions. Some learners suggested incorporating more group activities, such as peer discussions or book clubs, and also integrating quizzes platform to further enhance learning. A learner stated:

"It would be nice if we could discuss the books in groups or have a book club. Talking about the story with others might make it more fun and easier to understand."

"I hope in the future; the learning includes assessment using quizzes and provides group discussions"

This feedback highlights the importance of interactive pedagogy and the role of the instructor in creating an engaging and supportive learning environment. The instructor should be trained in providing scaffolding techniques and designing interactive activities to maximize the pedagogical benefit of E-graded readers, particularly in regional contexts where learner support is pivotal

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that CEFR e-graded readers from <https://english-e-reader.net> are generally effective in improving reading proficiency among Indonesian EFL learners. The moderate positive correlation ($r=0.659$) between CEFR levels and test scores shows a meaningful association: as learners advance through higher proficiency levels, they tend to perform better on reading comprehension tests. This indicates that the alignment between learners' reading levels and the texts they are exposed to is, for the most part, effective. However, the moderate strength of this



correlation suggests that there is potential to refine the program further, especially for lower-level learners.

Moreover, the result of one-way ANOVA confirms that the differences in reading comprehension scores across CEFR levels are statistically significant. With a large effect size, the analysis indicates that over half of the variance in test scores can be attributed to learners' CEFR reading levels. This underscores the substantial role of appropriate text difficulty in shaping comprehension outcomes.

The Post-hoc Turkey HSD test adds nuance to the findings, learners at higher levels (B1, B1+ and B2) show better performance, those at lower levels (A1, A2) face significant challenges. The qualitative feedback confirms that learners at these levels struggle particularly with comprehension issues like understanding idiomatic expressions and cultural references. Heidari & Aliyar (2025) point out, learners at lower proficiency levels often face challenges with more complex language features, such as idiomatic expressions, which require advanced comprehension skills. Another research also revealed that Extensive reading seemed to have a negative impact on attitude measures for learners of low proficiency but produced positive outcomes for high-level learners on both attitudes and linguistic measures (Lee et al., 2015).

The qualitative findings further highlight that motivation plays a crucial role in the success of the program. Learners who were able to choose their reading materials based on personal interests were more motivated and engaged. This finding aligns with Lin (2025), who asserts that self-selection of reading materials fosters intrinsic motivation, enhances reading engagement, and self-assessment. Learners also reported improvements in vocabulary acquisition and effects on their writing and speaking, aligning with several studies that showed extensive reading significantly enhances vocabulary retention through repeated exposure to new words in context, or supports incidental vocabulary learning and cross-skill development (Horst, 2005; Nation & Waring, 2019; Octavianti et al., 2023)

On the other hand, the learners' suggestion for interactive features, such as quizzes in evaluation and other multimedia, reflects a desire for multimodal learning, which is shown to increase learner engagement and retention (Mayer, 2005). Cultural awareness also emerged as another important factor. Learners felt that the program helped them understand Western culture, but a few also pointed out that they sometimes struggled to understand the text if it focused on past traditions that limited the cultural relevance. Providing more contemporary texts could address this gap and provide a more balanced view of the Western world. Kramersch (1993) discusses how language learning materials that reflect contemporary cultural contexts are more engaging and relatable to learners, reinforcing the need for up-to-date and diverse cultural representations.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings underscore the importance of differentiated instruction and collaborative learning. Providing personalized reading materials based on learners' proficiency levels and interests, along with supportive transitional activities like group discussions and collaborative reading, could further enhance both engagement and comprehension. In the absence of this support, it is improbable that students will achieve self-motivation and independence in their ER, either in or out of the classroom (Robb & Ewert, 2024). Tomlinson (2023) also highlights the importance of differentiated instruction in language teaching, which tailors learning experiences to meet the diverse needs of learners. Additionally, Vygotsky's social



constructivist theory stresses the value of collaborative learning, where peer interaction and group activities foster deeper comprehension and language acquisition (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978)

In summary, while the program demonstrates pedagogical potential, its impact could be amplified through adaptive scaffolding and learner-centered design. These refinements would better support diverse learners, particularly in regional contexts like West Sulawesi.

CONCLUSION

The moderate correlation between learners' CEFR levels and reading test scores indicates that the E-Graded readers is aligned with learners' reading proficiency levels and help improve their reading comprehension.

However, the study also highlights several challenges, particularly for learners at lower proficiency levels (A2 and below). Comprehension issues, such as understanding idiomatic expressions and cultural references, were reported, suggesting the need for scaffolding strategies to better support these learners. Additionally, motivation emerged as a key factor, with learners emphasizing the importance of self-selected reading materials and interactive features to keep them engaged. The integration of reading with speaking and writing activities, along with accessible platform features, also facilitated broader language development.

To improve the program, it is recommended to provide vocabulary support from the instructor to help lower-level learners overcome comprehension difficulties, especially with idiomatic expressions and cultural references, and to offer alternative assessment methods using a digital platform. Furthermore, increased peer/ group interaction, provided alternative assessment, and integrated collaborative learning should be prioritized to foster a more engaging and supportive learning environment.

Limitations of this study include the use of a single platform (<https://english-e-reader.net>) and a limited participant sample, which consisted of English educational learners at one institution. Therefore, future research should consider multi-institutional studies to validate these findings in diverse educational contexts.

In summary, this study suggests that while CEFR-leveled e-graded readers from English-e-reader.net are effective and matched with EFL learners' reading proficiency in West Sulawesi, adjustments in the extensive program's design and instructional strategies could further improve its impact on learner learning. By addressing the challenges of comprehension, motivation, and cultural relevance, educators or instructors can create a more engaging and effective extensive reading program.

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