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Correlation of Informal Study Frequency and English Reading Proficiency Among EFL Learners

Revi Nauval Ilhansyah[1], Triono Budi Nugroho[2], Muhammad Romdoni[3], Abdul Syahid[4]
[1,2,3,4]Institut Agama Islam Negeri Palangka Raya
E-mail: revinauval77@gmail.com[1], triyoobn@gmail.com[2], romdony09@gmail.com[3], abdul.syahid@lain-palangkaraya.ac.id[4]

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Abstract: *This study investigates the relationship between informal study frequency and test scores among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to determine whether non-traditional study habits contribute to academic performance. Employing a correlational research design, data were collected from a sample of EFL learners through self-reported study frequency surveys and standardized English test scores. The Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used to analyze the data, given the non-normal distribution of the variables. The results reveal no statistically significant correlation between informal study frequency and test scores, as indicated by a weak Spearman's rho and a high p-value. These findings suggest that informal study habits may not directly influence test performance in the observed sample, emphasizing the complexity of factors affecting EFL learners' academic outcomes. While informal learning remains an essential aspect of language acquisition, its measurable impact on standardized assessments warrants further investigation. Future research could benefit from a larger sample size and the inclusion of additional variables, such as formal study practices, learner motivation, or access to resources, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how various factors interact to influence EFL test performance. This study highlights the importance of cautious interpretation when analyzing the role of informal learning in academic achievement.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, understanding the relationship between study hours and English proficiency has gained significant attention, particularly in the context of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners (Li & Gan, 2022). As globalization progresses, English proficiency has become increasingly crucial, with learners seeking ways to improve their skills both inside and outside the classroom (Delgado & Salmerón, 2021). The English reading ability has always been considered crucial in academics and is considered as most vital of the four language skills.(Alharbi, 2021; Yapp et al., 2023)

Research suggests that the time spent studying plays a vital role in language acquisition (Zubair et al., 2024). For instance, students who engage in consistent study routines tend to show improved language outcomes. However, the nature of this relationship is not always straightforward (Sukying, 2021). Some studies, such as those examining out-of-school exposure to English, indicate that extracurricular activities like engaging with English media, social media, and video games can integrate formal study efforts, contributing positively to English proficiency (Tran & Miralpeix, 2024). These findings align with broader research that shows a correlation between exposure time and proficiency levels, particularly in oral and vocabulary skills. Reading is a cognitive process that incorporates a variety of knowledge sources, from lexical attributes to the knowledge of current scenarios in the world. Reading skills in "balanced reading" are the consequence of growing abilities in the areas of decoding and linguistic understanding.(Alotaibi, 2022)

This study's objective is to dive deeper into the specific correlation between study hours and English proficiency among EFL learners in central Borneo, Indonesia. Using statistical tools, the research will analyze whether increased study hours directly correlate with increasing of proficiency or whether the relationship is influenced by other factors such as the quality of study and the type of language exposure. Understanding these dynamics will provide valuable insights for educators and learners alike, as they seek to optimize study practices for improved language outcomes. Thus, the following question is used as guidance for conducting this research: Is there any correlation between informal study or language exposure and reading proficiency?

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The Role of Informal Study in Language Acquisition

Informal study, encompassing self-directed and extracurricular learning activities, has long been recognized as a critical component of language acquisition (Tran & Miralpeix, 2024). Unlike formal instruction, informal study allows learners to explore language in real-life contexts, fostering a more personalized and meaningful learning experience (Bruen & Erdocia, 2024). Activities such as watching English-language media, reading for pleasure, or using language-learning apps provide learners with opportunities to engage with authentic language use, which is often absent in traditional classroom settings (Hanghøj et al., 2022; Komala & Rifai, 2021). This type of exposure is especially valuable for developing practical skills that are directly applicable to everyday communication.

The positive impact of informal study on language development is well-documented in research. Studies have shown that learners who regularly engage in informal learning activities tend to demonstrate stronger language skills compared to those relying solely on formal instruction (Tran & Miralpeix, 2024; Vanbecelaere et al., 2020). These activities enhance various aspects of language proficiency, including vocabulary acquisition, contextual understanding, and fluency (Piccione et al., 2024). For example, learners watching English media not only improve their listening skills but also gain exposure to colloquial expressions and cultural nuances, which are crucial for real-world communication. Similarly, reading for pleasure helps develop comprehension and critical thinking skills in a relaxed and engaging manner.

Despite its potential benefits, the effectiveness of informal study varies based on several factors. Learner motivation, the frequency of engagement, and the quality of materials used significantly influence outcomes (Komala & Rifai, 2021; Qiao et al., 2023) Regular and consistent exposure to English is essential for building language proficiency, but it must be paired with high-quality, level-appropriate resources to maximize learning (Cetin, 2021). Additionally, personal motivation plays a key role in determining how actively learners participate in informal study.

Without intrinsic or extrinsic incentives, learners may struggle to maintain consistent engagement, limiting the potential gains from these activities. These considerations highlight the need for a balanced approach that encourages sustained and purposeful engagement in informal language learning.

Correlation Between Study Habits and Reading Proficiency

Reading proficiency is a critical skill for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, as it serves as a foundation for academic success and language mastery (Ihekanwa et al., 2021). Previous research has consistently demonstrated a positive correlation between time spent on study activities and reading proficiency. For example, Kao (2020) found that EFL learners who dedicated more time to structured and informal reading activities exhibited higher comprehension scores. Similarly, noted that frequency and consistency in engaging with English texts significantly improved learners' reading abilities. However, these studies also highlight that time alone is insufficient; learner motivation, background knowledge, and the use of diverse, engaging materials are equally important contributors to reading success (Yang & Lu, 2021).

Extracurricular Exposure to English and Proficiency

Engagement with English media, such as movies, podcasts, and online platforms, has become an increasingly recognized factor in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Research by Tran & Miralpeix (2024) indicates that learners who regularly interact with English-language content outside of the classroom tend to demonstrate higher proficiency levels, particularly in reading and listening. Unlike the structured nature of formal classroom instruction, these media provide learners with exposure to authentic language use, offering a more dynamic and contextualized form of learning. Such experiences are especially valuable in developing skills that are transferable to real-life situations, providing learners with a more holistic understanding of the language.

Studies by Hanghøj et al. (2022) emphasize the cognitive benefits of multimodal English content, such as combining audio and visual input. Exposure to various forms of media—whether video, audio, or text—engages multiple cognitive processes that reinforce language comprehension and retention. For example, watching English-language movies with subtitles or listening to podcasts while reading their transcripts allows learners to connect spoken and written forms of the language, improving both listening and reading comprehension simultaneously. This multimodal approach enhances learners' ability to understand language in different contexts and improves their overall retention of vocabulary and grammar structures.

The increasing recognition of informal exposure to English highlights its complementary role alongside formal education. While traditional classrooms provide structured lessons and focused language instruction, informal study through media engagement offers a distinctive and flexible pathway to language acquisition (Pinninti, 2024). The self-directed nature of informal learning allows learners to pursue their interests and engage with content at their own pace, fostering intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement. Furthermore, exposure to diverse linguistic and cultural contexts through media ensures that learners develop a more rounded understanding of the language, beyond what is typically covered in textbooks or classroom exercises (Kao, 2020; Komala & Rifai, 2021; Yalcin et al., 2023). As such, informal study serves not only as a supplement to formal education but also as a crucial tool for fostering deeper language proficiency.

Furthermore, methodological challenges, such as reliance on self-reported data for study hours and the small sample sizes of many studies, often limit the generalizability of research findings (Zainurrahman et al., 2024). These limitations underscore the need for more

comprehensive studies that employ diverse participant groups and adopt rigorous data collection methods to draw more reliable conclusions. In sum, the literature highlights the complex dynamics between structured study hours and informal exposure to English, emphasizing that a holistic approach is essential for effective language learning. While study hours are undeniably important, the integration of real-world language use and varied learning experiences is equally critical. Future research should explore these dynamics further, focusing on larger and more diverse samples, examining different levels of proficiency, and utilizing advanced methodologies (Mustopa et al., 2024). Such efforts would provide deeper insights into the multifaceted factors that influence English proficiency, ultimately supporting more effective teaching and learning practices in EFL contexts.

METHOD

This study will employ a quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between the number of study hours and English proficiency among university EFL learners. Correlational research helps identify the strength and direction of relationships between variables without manipulating them. This design is effective in exploring naturally occurring variables, as previously demonstrated in language learning research studies by Baliyan & Khama (2020).

Participants will include EFL learners from Islamic public university in central Borneo, specifically targeting those at the intermediate proficiency level. A total of 20 students recruited using stratified random sampling to ensure equal representation based on study program. Stratified sampling has been recommended in EFL research as a means to increase the accuracy and reliability of the findings, as discussed in prior studies on learner behavior and proficiency.

To measure study hours, this study will use a custom-designed survey modeled on an online questionnaire created by the GRAL research group, which was applied in recent research by Tran and Miralpeix (2024). This survey will capture participants' time spent on various English learning activities, including formal study, homework, self-study, and online practice through apps or media. Drawing on validated survey instruments used in previous studies on study habits, this approach ensures alignment with established research standards. Additionally, a reading proficiency test derived from a TOEFL mock exam will assess participants' reading skills, providing an objective measure of their proficiency level in English reading. Responses regarding the frequency of out-of-school activities in English were coded on a 6-point scale: 1 = never, 2 = less than once a month, 3 = once to three times per month, 4 = once to three times per week, 5 = four to six times per week, and 6 = every day.

The study will begin with an orientation session where participants are briefed on its purpose, the survey format, and the proficiency test. Data collection will take place in a controlled classroom environment to ensure consistent test-taking conditions. During this phase, participants will complete a survey recording their study hours over a one-month period, while a proficiency test will be administered to assess their English skills. Ethical considerations are prioritized, with all participants being assured of confidentiality and asked to provide informed consent. The research will follow ethical guidelines for human subjects as outlined by institutional review boards, following recommendations from Fleming and Zegwaard (2018).

To investigate the relationship between informal study frequency and reading proficiency, Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (Spearman's rho) was employed. This non-parametric statistical method is suitable for evaluating the strength and direction of monotonic relationships between two variables, particularly when the data do not meet the assumptions of normality or linearity.

Before conducting the correlation analysis, the data were assessed for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test. The results indicated that the data deviated significantly from a normal

distribution ($p < 0.05$), justifying the use of Spearman's correlation instead of parametric alternatives such as Pearson's correlation coefficient.

Spearman's rank correlation calculates the association between variables by ranking the data and measuring the concordance of the ranked pairs. This approach is less sensitive to outliers and irregularities in data distribution, making it ideal for the current dataset. The correlation coefficient (ρ) ranges from -1 to 1, where:

$\rho > 0$ indicates a positive monotonic relationship (as one variable increases, the other also tends to increase).
$\rho < 0$ indicates a negative monotonic relationship (as one variable increases, the other tends to decrease).
$\rho = 0$ suggests no monotonic relationship.

The statistical significance of the correlation was tested using a p-value, with $\alpha = 0.05$ as the threshold for significance. All analyses were performed using JASP ensuring robust and reproducible results.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study looked at how study hours relate to English reading skills among EFL students in Central Borneo. The survey results and a TOEFL reading test showed a moderate positive link between the two. Students who studied more hours tended to get better reading scores, as seen with Spearman's correlation coefficient ($r = 0.135$, $p < 0.05$). However, some students with fewer study hours still performed well, suggesting that other factors, such as the type of study, may also affect reading skills. The results also showed that using English outside of class like watching English media or using English apps was connected to higher reading scores. Specifically, students who engaged with English media about 4-6 times a week generally scored higher on reading tests than those with little or no exposure.

Table 1. Shapiro-Wilk Test for Multivariate Normality

Shapiro-Wilk	P
0.896	0.010

To assess the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, Cronbach's alpha was calculated for Section A. The result ($\alpha = 0.826$) demonstrated a really good level of internal consistency, suggesting that the items in this section reliably measure the intended construct. This alpha value aligns with established thresholds for acceptable reliability in social science research, indicating that the questionnaire items are consistently capturing related aspects of the construct being studied (Tran & Miralpeix, 2024). This study investigated the correlation between two variables to determine if a meaningful association exists. Given the non-normal distribution of the data, verified by the Shapiro-Wilk test, this study opted to use the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient to evaluate the association between the variables. Interpreting these results, it is likely that the weak correlation observed between the two variables could be due to random variation rather than a genuine association. A p-value of 0.571 indicates that there is a 57.1% probability that such a correlation could occur by chance, which is not strong enough evidence to support the existence of a meaningful relationship. Thus, we fail to reject the null hypothesis of no association between the variables.

Table 2. Spearman's Correlations

Sprearman's rho	0,135
p-value	0,571

These findings confirm that study hours contribute to improving English skills. However,

study hours alone are not the sole determining factor. The quality of study time and engagement in English activities outside the classroom also play a significant role in language development. Effective reading skills are nurtured not only by dedicated study hours but also by exposure to diverse English materials, as supported by previous research. This underscores the importance of a balanced approach that includes both structured study and varied learning resources.

Additionally, the results highlight the benefits of combining formal study with informal English exposure. Learners who engaged in both types of practice often achieved higher test scores, benefiting from a variety of language sources. This combination allows for a more holistic learning experience, enhancing different aspects of English proficiency. However, the moderate correlation between study hours and test scores suggests that other factors, such as student motivation, the quality of study methods, and real-world English usage, are equally important in shaping outcomes (Han, 2021).

The study had some limitations, such as the small sample size and reliance on self-reported study hours, which may lack accuracy. Future research could address these issues by involving a larger and more diverse group of learners and using more precise methods for tracking study habits. Additionally, examining learners with different skill levels and in various learning environments may provide deeper insights into how study habits influence English proficiency. Overall, this study emphasizes that while study hours are valuable, integrating English into daily life is crucial for effective learning. Teachers could encourage students to engage in a range of English activities both inside and outside the classroom to maximize their language development.

CONCLUSUION

In summary, the findings of this study indicate no statistically significant correlation between the two variables, as evidenced by the weak Spearman's rho and the high p-value. These results suggest that any observed relationship between the variables is likely due to chance rather than a true underlying association. This lack of statistical significance underscores the importance of cautious interpretation in correlation studies, as weak coefficients alone are not sufficient to establish meaningful relationships between variables.

For future research, exploring a larger sample size could provide greater statistical power and potentially reveal subtler patterns or associations that were not detectable in this study. Additionally, incorporating other relevant variables may offer a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing the relationship in question. Such refinements to the research design may help clarify whether the absence of correlation observed here is consistent across different contexts or unique to the current dataset.

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