

Fostering Novice L2 Pleasure Reading: The Role of Comprehension, Text Difficulty, and Enjoyment

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Abstract

This study reviews the effect of comprehension and perceived text difficulty in promoting reading enjoyment and interest to read more among novice learners practicing extensive and pleasure reading. Sixty-seven college students in their first semester of Spanish were asked to read a children-like story picture book in Spanish and were then given both a comprehension test and a brief perception questionnaire about how much they had enjoyed the story, how difficult they thought the reading had been, and whether they had interest to read more. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses show that (1) students' perception on the level of difficulty of a text align with their actual comprehension of the story, (2) the level of reading enjoyment is strongly related to how much the students understood and how difficult the text was perceived to be, and (3) reading enjoyment and interest to read more are highly correlated when novice learners find the text easy. Pedagogical implications are discussed.

Keywords: *Extensive and pleasure reading, novice learners, reading enjoyment, reading interest, reading comprehension, text difficulty, college level, Spanish as L2*

Background

Palmer (1977, as cited in Day & Bamford 1989) initially coined the term *extensive reading* to distinguish this holistic approach from *intensive reading*, characterized by a more analytical style. Over time, the concept of *extensive reading* has been recognized by various names in practice and the literature, such as *pleasure reading*, reading for pleasure, independent reading, sustained silent reading, free voluntary reading, leisure or recreational reading. Despite the diverse labels, they all refer to the same concept. In this paper, the term *extensive and pleasure reading* (EPR) will be used.

EPR is an instructional approach in which learners read numerous easy books with the purpose of enjoyment and general comprehension. It involves students self-selecting reading materials based on their interests and language proficiency. Suitable materials for pleasure reading include graded readers, short stories, comics, novels, and magazines. An effective method for implementing EPR at lower levels

of instruction incorporates the use of a reading aloud technique. Teachers read books aloud, actively engaging with students, introducing vocabulary, modeling pronunciation and intonation, and fostering discussions related to the content. This method has proven effective among English learners with novice and emerging levels of proficiency across various language instruction contexts, including second language learning, children developing their first language, and low-literate adults (Krashen, 2015; Rodrigo et al., 2014).

Literature Review

Krashen is a prominent advocate for EPR, which he terms Pleasure Reading or Free Voluntary Reading. He has played a crucial role in explaining the theoretical foundations of EPR, which are based on the Input-Comprehension Hypothesis, the Reading Hypothesis, the Pleasure Hypothesis, and the notion that we learn to read by reading (Eskey, 1986; Goodman, 1982). The Input Hypothesis (1982, 1985) states that we acquire language when we understand messages, that is, when we understand what we hear and what we read, when we receive *comprehensible input*. The input hypothesis suggests that language acquisition happens when learners are exposed to input that is slightly above their current proficiency level, but still understandable with the help of context and other linguistic clues. This is referred to as the “i+1” metaphor, where “i” represents the learner’s current level of linguistic competence, and “+1” represents language input that is slightly above it. If the input is too easy, below the learner’s current level (“i-1”), it may lack the necessary linguistic challenge for language acquisition to occur. However, i-1 can have positive outcomes in terms of boosting learners’ confidence and fostering positive attitudes toward reading, aligning with the principles of EPR (Day & Bamford, 1998).

The Reading Hypothesis (Krashen, 2004), based on the Input Hypothesis, claims that reading in large amounts for content and information is the source of language acquisition and literacy in a first language (L1) and a second language (L2). Reading results in the acquisition of literacy-related aspects of language: reading comprehension, spelling, vocabulary, writing style, grammar, reading fluency. The Pleasure Hypothesis (Krashen, 1994) states that the pedagogical activities that promote language acquisition are enjoyable. This observation may explain why students often express enjoyment in reading simple and ‘silly’ stories, particularly at the beginner level; however, enjoyment does not guarantee language acquisition.

There is a substantial body of research supporting reading as an effective tool for accelerating language acquisition and promoting language literacy in both first and second languages (Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2004; Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021). Specifically, EPR has emerged as one of the most effective ways to acquire a language while deriving enjoyment from the reading experience. EPR modality complements the more traditional intensive reading practices where students read short texts, often difficult, with the purpose of practicing grammar and vocabulary. Research advocates for the integration of both reading modalities, intensive and extensive, as integral parts of any language curriculum (Grabe, 2009; Jeon et al., 2015; Nation, 2009).

Despite the evidence demonstrating that EPR contributes to the development of literacy and language proficiency in a L1 (Krashen, 2004) as well as English as a L2

(Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2011; Nation & Waring, 2020), its adoption in the context of Spanish as a second or foreign language has been limited. Studies on EPR in English as a L2, consistently show improvements in reading speed, vocabulary acquisition, spelling accuracy, grammar proficiency, writing style, listening comprehension, and speaking skills (Jeon & Day, 2016; Jeon & Yamashita, 2014; Krashen, 2007; Liu & Zhang, 2018; Mol & Bos, 2011; Nakanishi, 2015). Longitudinal studies further emphasize the importance of time, with extended programs yielding more robust benefits, although some short-term programs have also proven effective (Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993; Suk, 2017). In essence, the more language learners read, the more proficient they become in reading, fostering faster development of literacy in both first and second languages.

Affective Benefits and Extensive and Pleasure Reading

EPR can operate optimally as a catalyst for language acquisition in L1 and L2, a crucial factor in enhancing students' success as learners. To transform EPR into a language acquisition pathway, it is crucial to understand and interconnect two key conditions:

1. Readers must understand what they are reading.
2. Readers must read a lot.

Reading at the appropriate level can serve as an optimal source of comprehensible input. For linguistic gains to happen through reading, condition 1 must be met, as language acquisition occurs when we understand the messages exposed to us (Krashen, 1982). To fulfill this condition, learners must be provided with a diverse range of reading materials concerning different topics and levels of difficulty, allowing them to choose what is interesting and comprehensible to them. However, reading and understanding a few books is not sufficient for language acquisition to occur through reading. Learners must be exposed to a significant amount of input (condition 2); in other words, they must understand and read a lot (Krashen 2004). Consequently, the primary aspect to consider when promoting EPR as a learning tool for language acquisition through reading is at the affective level: learners must want to read.

Research indicates that EPR positively impacts affective variables such as attitude towards reading, motivation to read, and reading habits (Day & Bamford, 1998). Developing a reading habit is a fundamental goal of an EPR program, aiming to help learners become independent readers who continue to enhance their language skills through reading beyond the classroom. To initiate this sequence of events, a positive reading experience is crucial.

Unlike the long-term benefits of reading in terms of linguistic improvements, affective gains such as attitude, reading motivation, and self-confidence as a reader have been observed in Spanish short-duration programs and the effects are immediate (Hardy, 2013, 2016; Liburd & Rodrigo, 2012). It is noteworthy that a positive reading experience with just *one* book has been shown to be sufficient in developing a positive attitude towards reading and motivation to read (Rodrigo, 2011). Additionally, there are no time or age limits to start enjoying reading and taking advantage of its benefits (Rodrigo et al., 2014). Despite the positive results at the linguistic and affective levels of language learning, the implementation of EPR

in beginning levels of Spanish language instruction is not a common practice at the college level and little is known about what makes novice Spanish college students enjoy the reading experience.

Learners Must Be Willing to Read. Reading Enjoyment in Novice Reader

The Affective Filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) explains how our feelings and attitudes affect how we learn a second language and why positive feelings (high motivation, good self-image as a learner, and low anxiety) facilitate language acquisition, while negative feelings (lack of motivation and self-confidence, and high anxiety) hinder language acquisition. The Affective Filter is defined as a psychological barrier that varies among language learners, influencing the reception and processing of input for language acquisition.

This hypothesis helps explain why learners with a positive attitude towards reading are more likely to willingly engage in reading. When texts are easy, readers experience lower levels of anxiety and frustration, thereby reducing the affective filter and fostering a positive attitude towards L2 reading (Day & Bamford, 1998; Yamashita, 2004, 2013). Moreover, a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction derived from reading and understanding also cultivates a positive reading attitude and motivation to read (Cho & Krashen, 2001; Day & Bamford, 1989; Ro, 2013; Rodrigo et al., 2014; Takase, 2007). On the contrary, reading becomes a source of frustration and is often abandoned when learners' anxiety is high (Rodrigo, 2011; Seller, 2000), frequently associated with the perceived difficulty of the material.

It is undeniable that learners may be more inclined to read when the input is compelling for them (Krashen et al., 2018)—when the input becomes so interesting that learners forget they are reading in a second language, focusing solely on the message. This flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) of getting lost in the message and forgetting the *form* when reading in a foreign language is difficult to achieve for students who find reading a challenge and struggle accessing the message. My experience is that novice readers have not yet reached the language competence needed to be lost in the flow of the message since they cannot easily process the text. What makes novice readers enjoy the reading experience to the extent that they are willing to read more has not been fully investigated. In a descriptive study, Rodrigo (2011) reported that exposing novice students to easy reading material resulted in reading enjoyment and a sense of accomplishment. Although the data was purely descriptive, and generalization of the results could not be made, this was a first attempt to understand what makes novice learners enjoy reading.

Based on Anderson's (2008) reading continuum (learners first learn to read and eventually read to learn) and what learners do and report when reading at different stages of the continuum, Rodrigo (2019) has suggested that the affective needs of beginners and advanced learners differ when it comes to reading enjoyment. According to Rodrigo (2019), what makes reading a positive experience will vary for these two groups of readers. Inexperienced readers may enjoy reading when they understand and feel a sense of accomplishment. Novice learners may find enjoyment in a reading experience if they feel they have overcome the challenge of understanding a text in the target language and it is not a frustrating experience. At the beginning level, reading about a topic that interests learners is not as crucial

challenging. A difficult text imposes low automaticity and high cognitive load on readers, forcing them to make excessive efforts to decode the text rather than processing it by assigning meaning more easily. In other words, the anxiety and frustration caused by a text beyond the reader's language competence negatively impacts a student's reading experience and heightens the affective filter.

To the best of my knowledge, there are no studies to date exploring the effect of text difficulty on promoting EPR in first-semester Spanish students at the college level. This exploratory study is an attempt to shed some light on the topic. It aims to investigate how comprehension and perception of text difficulty may affect reading enjoyment and interest to read in novice learners attending the first semester of Spanish at the college level. Specifically, this study explores whether reading enjoyment can be attempted and achieved by low proficiency students learning Spanish at the college level using an EPR modality. Additionally, the study analyzes if college level students enjoy reading children-like stories in a second language, how much students understand when they perceive the text as easy, at the right level, or difficult, and if their perceived level of difficulty affects learners' enjoyment and interest in reading.

Research Questions

The research questions (RQ) of this study are as follows:

RQ1. What is the perception of reading a children-like story using an EPR approach on college beginners?

RQ1.1 Did participants enjoy reading the story?

RQ1.2 Are participants interested in reading similar stories?

RQ1.3 How difficult did participants find the story?

RQ2. How much do novice readers understand when they perceive the text as easy, difficult or at their right level?

RQ2.1 Is there any difference in the students' perception of reading enjoyment and interest to read based on how difficult they perceived the story?

RQ3. What is the relationship between reading enjoyment, interest in reading, and text difficulty in novice readers?

RQ3.1 Does this relationship vary according to how much learners understood and how difficult they perceived the text? If so, how?

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were students enrolled in the first semester of Spanish at an urban college in a major city in the U.S. Southeast. The institution did not require a placement test for registration, allowing students with varying levels of Spanish proficiency, ranging from true beginners to those with prior high school exposure. The study involved three classes, totaling 67 participants, who participated voluntarily and anonymously. Most participants were in their early twenties (95%), with a higher representation of women (87%). Additionally, 97% of the participants indicated they were taking Spanish to meet their university's language requirement,

and none reported a history of ever reading for pleasure in Spanish.

Material and Data Collection

The reading material for this study was *El gatito solo* [The Lonely Kitten], a children-like picture book from Serie Leamos (n.d.), a free digital library of engaging stories written and illustrated by Georgia State University students. The purpose of this library is to provide comprehensible and interesting reading material that allows language learners to practice EPR from the beginning (Rodrigo, 2023). *El gatito solo* tells the story of Valentín and his kitten who accidentally was left behind by the family when they went to visit their grandmother. Lonely and hungry, the kitten discovers a box of cat food on the table, causing a mess while trying to reach it. When Valentín returns and finds the chaos, he expresses regret for forgetting the kitten and promises never to leave him alone again. This title was selected because it was a short 200-word story with a simple plot, linear storyline, short sentences, present tense, and illustrations that contextualize the story and give readers clues to aid comprehension. The book incorporates ten keywords introduced before the text to guide readers while reading.

Data collection involved a Likert-scale questionnaire on students' perceptions (see Appendix A) and a multiple-choice reading comprehension test (see Appendix B). The comprehension test included seven questions, all in English, so that incorrect answers due to lack of language proficiency could be prevented. The comprehension test showed a high reliability, indicated by a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.84, confirming its effectiveness in assessing readers' comprehension of the story.

The perception questionnaire employed a Likert scale for its three questions. Students reported their levels of enjoyment, interest in reading, and perceived difficulty of the text, using a three-point scale: 1 (negative perception), 2 (neutral), and 3 (positive perception). Each question provided space for students to elaborate on their responses, though this qualitative data will not be analyzed here. The Cronbach alpha coefficient for the perception questionnaire was $\alpha = 0.75$, indicating reasonable internal consistency for a questionnaire with fewer than ten questions (Pallant, 2005).

Procedures

The study employed the reading aloud technique to present the story to students in a storytelling setting during weeks 10 to 12 of a 14-week semester. The instructor began by presenting the book cover and title, followed by reading aloud while directing students' attention to story illustrations projected on the classroom board. After completing the story, students anonymously and voluntarily filled out the perception questionnaire and the reading comprehension test.

Data Analysis and Results

The analysis of the research questions involved utilizing various methods, including descriptive data analysis, One-way ANOVA, and correlations. A preliminary examination of the data indicated a normal distribution. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the affective questionnaire and reading comprehension test, presenting frequencies, mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum values.

Table 1

Descriptive Data for Students' Perception of Reading Enjoyment, Interest in Reading More, and Text Difficulty.

N=67	Likert Scale	Frequency	Percentage	M	SD	Min.	Max.
Reading Enjoyment	1- A Little-No	22	32.8	2.17	0.90	1	3
	2- Sometimes	11	16.4				
	3- Always-Yes	34	50.7				
Interest to Read	1- A Little-No	11	16.4	2.30	0.74	1	3
	2- Maybe	25	37.3				
	3. Always-Yes	31	46.3				
Text Difficulty	1- Difficult	7	10.5	2.13	0.57	1	3
	2-At the right level	44	65.6				
	3- Easy	16	23.9				
Reading comprehension	6 Questions		1-100	87.7	18.2	14.2	100

An inspection of the descriptive data in Table 1 shows sixty-seven (N=67) respondents used a three-point Likert scale to rate their perception about the variables of the study. For “Reading Enjoyment,” the mean (M) was 2.17 (Sometimes) with a standard deviation (SD) of 0.90, ranging from 1 (A little-No) to 3 (Always-Yes). The variable “Interest to Read” displayed a mean of 2.30 and SD of 0.74, indicating a moderate level (Sometimes). Regarding “Text Difficulty,” the participants generally perceived the text as being at the right level (M = 2.13, SD = 0.57). The last row of Table 1 displays the students’ overall score on the reading comprehension test, which includes six questions. The score is in percentage with a mean of 87.7, a standard deviation of 18.2, and a range from 14.2 to 100.

Figures 2-4 below visually present the descriptive data. In general, participant perceptions of the three affective variables—reading enjoyment, interest in reading, and text difficulty—present average values on the three-point Likert Scale within the ranges from negative (1-No-a little, No, Difficult), neutral (2- Sometimes, Maybe, Right level) to a positive perception (3- Most-always, Yes, Easy). The standard deviation is slightly higher in perceptions of enjoyment (0.90) than in interest to read (0.74) and text difficulty (0.57).

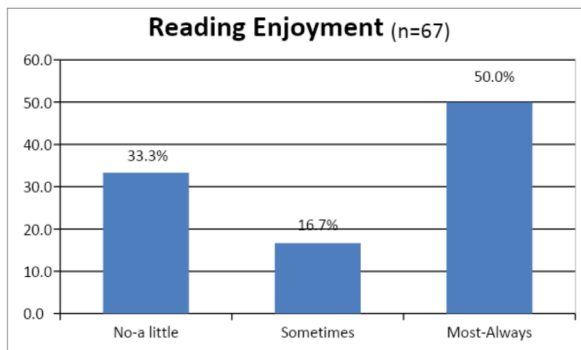


Figure 2. Perceived enjoyment when reading the story.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of reading enjoyment frequencies. Exactly half of the participants (50%) reported experiencing enjoyment while reading, 16% found it enjoyable sometimes, and 33.3% expressed limited or no enjoyment of the story.

Figure 3 showcases the frequencies of interest in reading more. Here, 46.4% of students expressed a willingness to read more similar stories, 37.3% remained uncertain but open to the idea, and 16.4% declared their unwillingness to continue to read children-like stories.

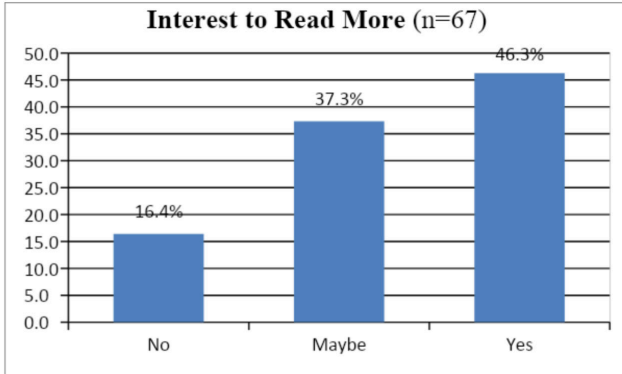


Figure 3. Students’ interest in reading similar stories.

The analysis of the descriptive data in Table 1 addresses RQ1. In summary, the perception of adult college novice learners reading a children-like story within an EPR approach leans towards a positive experience. A majority (66.7%—always or sometimes) enjoyed the story, expressed interest in reading more stories (83.6%—yes and maybe), and believed the text was at their appropriate level (89.5%—right level-easy). These results suggest that a children-like picture book, similar to the one utilized in this study, could serve as an optimal source of input for our adult novice participants.

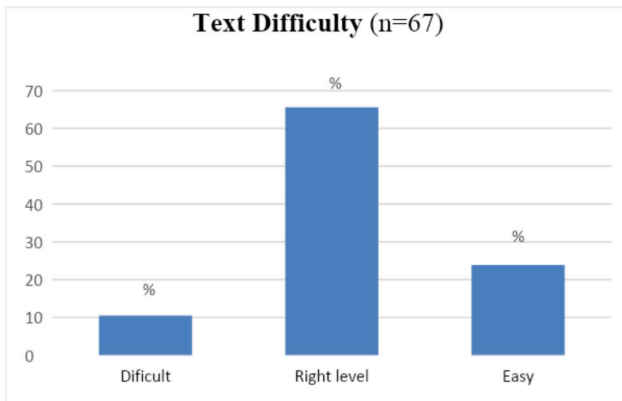


Figure 4. Perceived Text Difficult of the story.

To address RQ2.1, which investigates how much beginners understand when they perceive the text as easy, difficult, or at their right level, I utilized data from both the reading comprehension test scores in Table 1 and students' self-reported perceptions of text difficulty. I organized participants into three groups based on their perceived text difficulty—Easy, Right level, and Difficult—and examined the corresponding reading comprehension scores for each group. Table 2 provides descriptive data on the reading comprehension scores of students categorized by their perception of text difficulty. The breakdown into three groups—Easy, Right level, and Difficult—reveals distinct patterns.

Table 2

Descriptive data. Reading comprehension scores according to text difficulty perceptions

Reading comprehension	N	M (%)	SD	Min.	Max.
Easy	16	97.3	5.8	85.7	100
Right level	44	88.8	14.8	42.8	100
Difficult	7	48.5	21.6	14.2	71.4
TOTAL	67	87.7	18.2	14.2	100

Across all 67 participants, the overall mean score was 87.7%, demonstrating a generally high level of comprehension. The total scores ranged from 14.2 to 100, with a standard deviation of 18.2. The 16 students who perceived the text as easy achieved an impressive mean score of 97.3%, indicating a high level of comprehension. The scores ranged from 85.7 to a perfect 100, with minimal variability ($SD=5.8$). These students have demonstrated a complete understanding of the story. The 44 students who felt the text was at the right level attained a mean score of 88.8%. While the range of scores was wider (42.8 to 100), indicating some variability ($SD=14.8$), the overall performance was still solid. These students appear to have followed the story without major difficulty, although there might be some portions that they missed or did not fully grasp. For the seven students who perceived the text as difficult, the mean score was 48.5, suggesting a lower level of comprehension. The scores in this group varied more widely, ranging from 14.2 to 71.4, with a higher standard deviation of 21.6. These students encountered difficulty understanding the story.

These findings illustrate the varying impact of perceived text difficulty on reading comprehension. Students who found the text easy or at the right level tended to perform well, while those perceiving it as difficult had more diverse comprehension outcomes, with some struggling to understand the text. Figure 5 illustrates the percentage of comprehension among students when they perceived the text as easy, at the right level, or difficult.

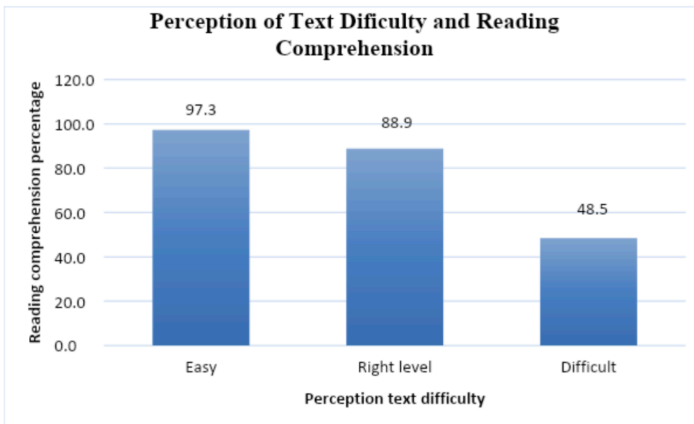


Figure 5. Perception of text difficulty and percentage of reading comprehension.

The findings in response to RQ2. suggest that novice students describe a text as easy when they comprehend almost all of it (97.3%), consider it at the right level when they understand an average of 88.9%, and label the text as difficult when comprehending at an average of 48.5%. The One-Way ANOVA confirms that the level of comprehension significantly differs among the three groups, $F(2,65) = 24.30, p < .001$. These results indicate that students' perceptions align with actual comprehension levels. Additionally, Pearson correlation analysis reveals a highly significant and moderate-high relationship between perceived text difficulty and comprehension ($r = .59, p < .001$).

The analysis to assess whether the perception of text difficulty influences students' reading enjoyment and interest in reading more (RQ2.1) involved conducting inferential statistics through One-Way ANOVA. This statistical method was employed to examine the potential impact of perceived text difficulty, categorized into three groups (Easy, Right level, and Difficult), on students' reported levels of reading enjoyment and interest to read more. The results from this analysis are essential for addressing RQ2.1 and gaining insights into how students' perceptions of text difficulty correlate with their affective responses to reading. The independent variable in this analysis is the students' perception of text difficulty, which is divided into three groups based on comprehension levels: Easy (with a 97.3% average comprehension), Right level (with an 88.9% average comprehension), and Difficult (with a 48.5% average comprehension). The dependent variables are reading enjoyment and interest to read more. Table 3 provides descriptive data for each of the three text difficulty groups, outlining the reported levels of enjoyment and interest in reading for each group. This information is crucial for understanding the potential impact of perceived text difficulty on students' affective responses during the reading experience. Visual inspection of the data in Table 3 shows that participants generally reported higher enjoyment and interest in reading when they perceived the text as easy or at the right level, with lower scores for those who found the text difficult. These findings suggest a connection between perceived text difficulty and participants' enjoyment and interest to read more.

Table 3*Reading Enjoyment and Motivation to Read across Perception of Text Difficulty*

N=67	Text Difficulty	N	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Enjoyment	Easy	16	2.50	0.82	1	3
	Right level	44	2.16	0.90	1	3
	Difficult	7	1.43	0.79	1	3
	TOTAL	67	2.17	0.90	1	3
Interest to Read More	Easy	16	2.31	0.70	1	3
	Right level	44	2.38	0.75	1	3
	Difficult	7	1.86	0.69	1	2
	TOTAL	67	2.3	0.74	1	3

The results of the One-Way ANOVA demonstrate a statistically significant difference among the three groups concerning the variable of enjoyment ($F(2, 65) = 3.70, p < .05$). Post hoc analysis using the LSD Test reveals that the group perceiving the text as difficult ($M=1.43$) significantly differs in enjoyment compared to the group perceiving the text at the right level ($M=2.16, p < .05, d = .67$) and the easy group ($M= 2.50, p < .05, d = .92$). According to Cohen (1988), the effect size suggests a large actual difference in mean scores between these groups, indicating that participants reported significantly more enjoyment when perceiving the text as less difficult. There was no difference in the level of enjoyment between the easy and right level groups. The ANOVA results for the variable “interest to read” do not indicate a statistically significant difference among the mean scores of the three groups, as the p-value exceeds .05 ($F(2, 65) = 1.44, p = .24$). This suggests that, for our participants, the perception of text difficulty did not have a significant impact on their interest to read more.

To examine the relationship among reading enjoyment, interest to read, and text difficulty (RQ3), we used Pearson Correlations. Table 4 displays the Pearson Correlation results for the 67 participants.

Table 4*Pearson Correlation for Reading Enjoyment, Interest to Read, and Text Difficulty.*

Variables	All N=67		
	1	2	3
1. Reading enjoyment	--	.49**	-.36**
2. Interest to read more	--	--	.16 ns
3. Text difficulty	--	--	--

**p< .01; *p< .05

The data in Table 4 reveals that the relationship between reading enjoyment and interest to read is positive, moderate-high, and highly significant (2-tailed), with a correlation coefficient of $r = .49$, $n = 67$, $p < .001$. This indicates that students who experienced higher enjoyment in reading also expressed a greater desire to read more. The shared variance between these two variables is 24%, suggesting a substantial overlap in their influence.

The correlation between reading enjoyment and text difficulty is negative, moderate, and highly significant (2-tailed), with a correlation coefficient of $r = -.36$, $n = 67$, $p < .001$. This implies that students showing greater enjoyment are the ones who perceived the text as less challenging. However, the practical significance of this correlation is low, as only 13% of the variance is shared between these two variables. The correlation between interest to read and text difficulty is not statistically significant (2-tailed), with $r = -.16$, $n = 67$, ns., indicating no relationship between these two variables.

To explore RQ3.2 (whether the relationship between reading enjoyment and interest to read changes across student perceptions of text difficulty), we used the variable perception of text difficulty (easy, right level, and difficult) as the independent variable and conducted Pearson Correlations for the variables of reading enjoyment and interest to read (see Table 5).

Table 5*Pearson Correlation between Reading Enjoyment and Interest to Read Across Perceived Level of Difficulty.*

Difficulty	Enjoyment & Interest
Easy	.76**
Right level	.37*
Difficult	.44 ns

*p< .05; **p< .01; ns. = not significant

As shown in Table 5, students who perceived the text as easy and understood an average of 97% of the story show a very strong, positive, and highly significant relationship between reading enjoyment and interest to read more ($r = .76$, $n = 16$, $p < .001$). These two variables share a substantial 58% of the variance, signifying a robust association. The correlation for the students who perceived the story at the right level and understood an average of 88% of the story, is moderate, positive and significant ($r = .37$, $n = 44$, $p < .05$); they share 14% of the variance. When the students perceived the text as difficult and understood an average of 44% and the story, the correlation is not statistically significant ($r = .44$, $n = 7$, ns), suggesting no relationship between enjoyment and interest to read in this group.

The data suggests that novice readers' interest to read more is connected to how much they enjoy the text, which is affected by how difficult they perceive it to be. Those who found the text easy to read and understood most of it had the highest levels of enjoyment. Therefore, it seems that considering a text as easy not only contributes directly to reading enjoyment, but also indirectly to the interest to read among novice readers. On the other hand, exposing students to a difficult text that they cannot understand does not seem to trigger high levels of enjoyment and interest in reading. It is important to consider these results in the specific context of this study and the population under investigation, as interpretations may vary based on the characteristics of the participants and the nature of the texts involved, yet these findings suggest the need for additional research.

Discussion and Conclusions

This exploratory study combines self-reported data (students' perceptions of text difficulty, reading enjoyment, and interest to read more) and objective assessment (reading comprehension test) to investigate whether students' perception of text difficulty plays a role in increasing reading enjoyment and interest to read in 67 novices' learners attending a first-semester Spanish at college level. The study found that participants' reading enjoyment and interest to read were strongly related to their perception of text difficulty and their comprehension of the text. Specifically, students who perceived the story as easy and had a better understanding of the text reported higher levels of reading enjoyment and interest to read ($r = .76$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, those who perceived the text as difficult and had lower comprehension scores reported lower levels of enjoyment and interest, but the correlation did not reach a statistically significant result ($r = .44$, ns). These results suggest that level of comprehension and perceiving the text as easy play a key role in fostering reading enjoyment among beginners. This finding underscores the significance of matching text difficulty and the proficiency level of novice readers. It could be claimed that providing texts that are accessible and comprehensible to beginners can enhance the reading experience and promote reading.

These results yield valuable insights into the factors that foster reading enjoyment among novice readers and the crucial role of reading in language acquisition and instruction. A discussion of the findings of the RQs follows.

1. *Feasibility to implement extensive and pleasure reading from the beginning of a language program* is supported by our data for RQ1, indicating that novice language learners can experience enjoyment and interest to read more from pleasure reading.

Children-like picture books emerge as a promising resource to implement extensive and pleasure reading among novice college learners. However, it is important to note that these findings should be validated through a larger sample size and a broader selection of titles.

2. *Students' perception on the level of difficulty of the text align with their actual comprehension of the story* as revealed by the results for RQ2, which support the idea that the perception of text difficulty can serve as a reliable predictor of comprehension. The students who perceived the text as easy understood an average of 97% of the story while those who perceived the story as difficult reached a reading comprehension score of 47%. Consequently, instructors should consider how students feel about the difficulty of the reading material they are using.

This finding can be considered an attempt to answer the question if perception of text difficulty matches actual difficulty and provides an answer to Arai's (2022) invitation to review the relationship between perception of text difficulty and comprehension. This relationship among our participants was $r = .58, p < .001$. This adds valuable information to the findings by Holster et al. (2017), who identified anxiety, text length, fatigue, and time pressure as factors related to text difficulty.

3. *The participants' reading enjoyment is linked to their perception of the story's difficulty and comprehension.* The perception of text difficulty significantly relates to the reported level of enjoyment, as indicated by the ANOVA results for RQ2.1 and RQ3. ANOVA results point out a real difference in the amount of enjoyment reported by participants with different levels of comprehension and perceived text difficulty. The data also suggest that language beginners who believe they can undertake a reading task because they perceive it as easy (with an actual comprehension rate of $M = 98\%$) are more likely to enjoy the reading experience and may be more inclined to continue to read in the target language. This finding is corroborated by the results for RQ3, which reveal a moderate yet highly significant correlation between reading enjoyment and text difficulty. It is important to note that correlations do not indicate causation but only indicate the degree of association between variables. However, given the nature of the variables in our study—text difficulty (easy text = comprehension) and enjoyment—a directional relationship can be hypothesized. In other words, understanding a text appears to be a prerequisite for enjoying it. The perceptions of success or failure triggered by students have significant implications for reading enjoyment among novice learners. Findings support previous research by Lai (1993), Wan-a-rom (2012), and Yang et al. (2021), who found that reading at the i-1 level promotes reading enjoyment and lowers the affective filter, creating a more conducive environment for language acquisition.

Perceiving a text as easy instills a sense of success and confidence, generating the 'I can do it' feeling (Rodrigo, 2019), lowering the affective filter, and enabling readers to enjoy the reading experience. Consequently, providing novice readers with texts they believe they can successfully read and texts that foster their confidence as language learners is crucial. On the contrary, providing texts that are difficult will trigger anxiety and frustration, which defeat enjoyment and interest to read.

4. *There is a high and strong correlation between reading enjoyment and interest in reading when beginners find the text easy* as shown in RQ3, specifically RQ3.1. This relationship is very strong and highly significant when the reader finds the text easy

and comprehends almost all ($r=.76, p.<.001$), and it is moderate and significant when participants perceive the text at their right level ($r = .37, p.<.05$). When participants consider the story difficult and comprehension is limited, no significant relationship exists between reading enjoyment and interest to read. These results clearly indicate that the more participants enjoy the reading experience, the more they want to read. 5. *The participants' interest in reading is strongly linked to reading enjoyment of a specific text* but it appears unaffected by their perception of text difficulty. The ANOVA results for RQ2.1 indicate that participants' perception of the story's difficulty did not yield any significant difference in the interest to read they reported. Additionally, there is no significant relationship between text difficulty and interest to read more, as reported in RQ3. This suggests that, while text difficulty may influence reading enjoyment, it may not exert the same impact on students' willingness to continue reading. Other factors or variables may play a role in shaping the interest to read in novice readers, and future studies should delve into these aspects.

In conclusion, these findings underscore the importance of a successful reading experience in promoting reading enjoyment at novice level. The reported reading enjoyment by participants in this study is likely attributed to a sense of accomplishment and confidence for understanding the story. On the contrary, an unsuccessful reading experience, exemplified by difficulties in understanding the reading, anxiety, and frustration, may lead to a lack of desire to read more.

I hypothesize that, in situations of success and reading enjoyment, readers will be inclined to repeat the experience and engage in more reading as shown in Figure 6. This supports the idea that a positive reading experience for beginning readers is likely to happen when novice readers feel accomplished, proud, and confident for understanding a story in a language they are learning. The sense of having a positive reading experience will fuel their desire to read more.

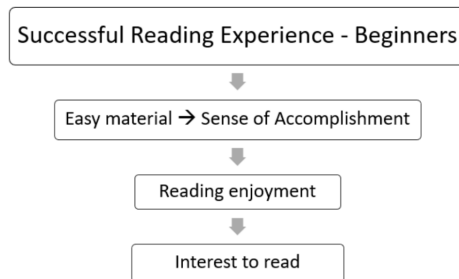


Figure 6. The importance of a successful reading experience among beginners to promote reading.

Consequently, this study suggests that comprehension in language instruction at the novice level is not only a necessary component for acquiring a foreign language (Krashen, 1981) but also a critical affective factor in promoting EPR during the initial stages of language instruction. It is well-established that reading about topics that are highly interesting and comprehensible to the reader not only promotes reading as a pleasure activity (Krashen et al., 2018) but also should be considered an ultimate goal when practicing EPR. However, until novice readers can easily

immerse themselves in content and forget they are reading in a foreign language, easy readings play a crucial role in cultivating self-confidence in their L2 ability. Easy readings offer beginners a joyful reading experience—an optimal way to start their reading journey. When students overcome the natural anxiety that every learner feels upon reading their first story in the target language and realize they can indeed read, enjoy, and understand, reading will become a pleasurable activity that may foster a genuine willingness to explore reading more in a foreign language.

Pedagogical Implications

If our goal is to provide a positive reading experience for novice and inexperienced readers, the key is to offer books, stories, and reading material that evoke an *I can do it'* sentiment, lower the affective filter, and create a sense of accomplishment as readers. Free access to a healthy library, containing a variety of topics and levels, where readers can select texts according to their interest, has been shown to be key in promoting reading, creating a positive reading attitude, and developing a reading habit among adult low-literate readers in L1 (Rodrigo et al., 2014). This study proposes that the same conditions should be met for L2. For Spanish, the *Serie Leamos* free online library is an excellent reading resource to practice pleasure reading from the beginning. To promote extensive and pleasure reading at beginning levels, the following features should be considered:

Easy access to a variety of reading material that allows self-selection. Beginning readers following an EPR approach should be able to select reading material that interests them and that can be read comfortably. This way, they can experience success, a sense of accomplishment, enjoyment, and interest in reading more. This is supported by the Pleasure Hypothesis (Krashen, 2004), which maintains that comprehensible, interesting, and self-selected material promotes reading. Additionally, self-selection has been claimed to be a factor that contributes to readers' pleasurable experiences (Arai, 2022; Macalister, 2015).

Vocabulary and illustrations as comprehension aids. Reading materials for beginners should include frequent vocabulary and visuals to aid comprehension. These features facilitate understanding and promote a successful reading experience. Vocabulary is a main factor to help or hinder comprehension, but providing simple or predictable vocabulary together with a brief glossary of keywords can be a good way of facilitating comprehension. Illustrations are another key component that has proved to be an excellent tool to aid comprehension (Mason & Krashen, 2020). Consequently, texts supplemented by illustrations that retell the story through images are another requirement for beginners because it eases the cognitive load. This is supported by Paivio's Dual-coding theory (Paivio, 1991) based on the benefits of visual information –or mental images—as a meaning-assigning tool. In the text we used for our study, illustrations portrayed several key parts of the story.

Length of the reading. The length of the reading should prevent beginners from feeling overwhelmed when reading in the target language. Short stories, ranging from 200 to 400 words, ensure a reading experience that can be completed within

two to four minutes. Short readings do not present a big challenge and can foster accomplishment. In fact, Holster et al. (2017) and Ayra (2022) found that book length was related to how difficult or easy a student perceives a text.

Storyline Clarity. A straightforward storyline with a few characters promotes plot clarity and ease of understanding. This is a desirable feature for novice readers. Furthermore, stories with a coherent storyline appear to foster stronger engagement better than the short passages found in traditional language textbooks using intensive reading (Paivio, 1991). A coherent storyline involves characters presented in a specific context, with a plot that includes an introduction, a problem or situation, and concludes with a resolution.

Limitations of the study and further research

While the present study shows important implications for the use of EPR in the language curriculum and provides valuable insights into the relationship between text difficulty/comprehension, reading enjoyment and interest to read among novice readers, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. The study focused on the comprehension and perception of a single text *El gatito solo*, which may not capture the full range of reading experiences and preferences among beginning learners. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding, future research could involve multiple texts with varying difficulty levels and genres. Moreover, a more extensive and diverse participant pool, reflecting various proficiency levels, would provide a broader perspective on the relationship between the variables of the study. Consequently, further research should replicate this study with a larger number of students and incorporate more than one book to explore the feasibility of implementing an extensive reading program in the language curriculum and analyze the roles that text difficulty, reading enjoyment, and interest in the story play at both beginning and intermediate levels.

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Appendix A

Student's perception questionnaire

This questionnaire is anonymous and voluntary. We would like to know what you think about the story you just read (*El gatito solo*). Please select the best option for you. Be honest, there are not good or bad answers.

1. Did you enjoy the story <i>El gatito solo</i> ?	A little-No	Sometimes	Always-Yes
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Why?

2. Would you like to read more stories like this?	A little-No	Sometimes	Always-Yes
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Why?

3. How difficult was the story?	Difficult	At the right level	Easy
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Why?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR FEEDBACK!

Appendix B

Reading Comprehension Test

Mark the answer that is correct according to the story you read. If you do not know the answer, check the third option (I do not know). Please, DO NOT GUESS. Gracias.

El gatito solo

1. This story is about...

- a. **what happens when a little kitten is alone at home and he is hungry.**
- b. a lesson that Valentin gives his kitten when the kitten behaves badly.
- c. I do not know.

2. The kitten...

- a. **is considered a member of the family.**
- b. is a gift from Valentín's parents.
- c. I do not know.

3. Valentín and the little kitten...

- a. don't get along well.
- b. love each other.**
- c. I do not know.

4. Valentín left the little kitten alone...

- a. because the kitten behaved badly.
- b. by accident when they go visit grandma.**
- c. I do not know.

5. The little kitten makes a mess in the kitchen because...

- a. he is hungry.**
- b. he is mad at Valentín for leaving him alone.
- c. I do not know.

6. When Valentín arrives home...

- a. he is upset because the kitten spilled food and milk on the floor.
- b. he is happy to see his little kitten again.**
- c. I do not know.

7. Valentín tells the kitten...

- a. to eat all the food on the floor.
- b. that he will never leave him alone again.**
- c. I do not know.