

Heutagogy-Based Digital Extensive Reading: Enhancing Students' Critical Reading Skills in EFL Islamic Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the application of the heutagogical teaching model through Digital Extensive Reading (DER) in enhancing university students' critical reading competencies in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. It focuses on three key aspects: (1) the implementation of heutagogy-based DER, (2) heutagogy-based DER's role in developing critical reading skills, and (3) the implications of this model. The participants consisted of 35 EFL Islamic university students. Using a qualitative structural analysis, data were gathered through document analysis, questionnaires, interviews, field notes, and literature review. The findings reveal that heutagogy-based DER empowers students to select texts, set goals, and engage in reflective learning, thereby fostering learner autonomy and personalization. Through exposure to diverse digital platforms, peer discussions, and presentations, students enhanced their critical thinking by developing analytical skills and intercultural awareness. Moreover, this approach redefined teachers' roles as facilitators, emphasized formative over summative assessment, and encouraged deeper, more meaningful engagement with reading.

KEYWORDS:

Heutagogy;
Digital extensive
reading; EFL; Islamic
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Introduction

In today's digital age, developing critical reading skills has become increasingly important for students, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). As learners are constantly exposed to complex texts and diverse information online, critical reading through in-depth analysis, evaluation, and synthesis is emerging as a fundamental academic skill (Blaschke, 2012; Kim, 2022). Critical reading goes beyond basic comprehension, requiring students to interpret, analyze, evaluate, and question texts to uncover meaning and intent (Ratanaruamkarn et al., 2023). It allows students to interpret text in a deeper way (Hairston-Dotson & Incera, 2022). It demands active and reflective engagement with the material,

utilizing higher-order cognitive skills such as problem-solving, synthesis, and metacognitive awareness, enabling readers to negotiate meaning with the author and construct new understandings (Sutherland & Incera, 2021).

Previous studies have identified three major challenges faced by EFL students in reading: limited linguistic competence, difficulties in the reading process, and motivational and anxiety-related issues (Hezam et al., 2022). These challenges are often linked to inadequate language proficiency, limited opportunities to practice critical thinking, and instructional approaches that emphasize comprehension rather than analysis and evaluation. As a result, many students tend to read passively and focus only on surface-level understanding. Similarly, He and AlSaqqaf (2025) reported that undergraduate students often struggle to critically evaluate and analyze the large volume of information they encounter, underscoring the ongoing difficulties in developing critical reading skills.

Addressing these challenges requires a student-centered pedagogical approach. Critical reading, by its very nature, thrives in an environment that fosters learner autonomy, critical inquiry, and reflective practice. This not only provides students with opportunities to analyze texts but also encourages them to question their underlying assumptions (Ratanaruamkarn et al., 2023). Therefore, fostering critical reading should be positioned as essential for implementation in higher education.

One effective pedagogical model that aligns with this need is heutagogy, or self-directed learning. Heutagogy places learners at the center of the process, empowering them to take charge of their educational paths and engage in self-directed, reflective inquiry (Blaschke & Hase, 2019; Ramas et al., 2023). By emphasizing learner agency, self-regulation, and adaptability, heutagogical practices directly support the development of critical reading skills. Research shows that such approaches encourage students to think beyond surface-level understanding, fostering deeper analysis, critical evaluation, and problem-solving (Lock et al., 2021; Mwinkaar & Lonibe, 2024).

Heutagogy, as an educational paradigm, emphasizes the development of self-directed learners who actively manage and construct their own learning experiences (Chandore et al., 2024). Initially introduced by Hase and Kenyon in 2001 (Mukuka & Tatira, 2025), heutagogy shifts the learning process from being teacher-centered to learner-centered. Its principles are learner agency, capability, reflection and metacognition, double-loop learning, and non-linear pathways that promote not only knowledge acquisition but also the ability to engage critically engage with knowledge and apply it across contexts (Blaschke & Hase, 2019; Hainsworth et al., 2022). By encouraging reflection and metacognitive awareness, heutagogy enhances students' critical thinking and comprehension, particularly in reading (Mwinkaar & Lonibe, 2024).

In this context, Digital Extensive Reading (DER) provides a practical application of heutagogical principles by fostering both learner autonomy and critical reading. Rooted in the foundations of Extensive Reading (ER), DER emphasizes meaning-focused engagement with large volumes of texts rather than intensive language study (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2024). By accessing a variety of digital materials across genres and platforms, students encounter authentic and diverse content that expands not only their comprehension but also their critical awareness. As Thomson et al. (2018) and Bala (2022) note, the flexibility of DER enables students to select texts aligned with their personal interests and academic needs, thereby enhancing motivation and sustaining engagement. This learner-driven choice reflects the

heutagogical principles of self-determined learning, in which students take ownership of their reading pathways and goals.

Moreover, DER contributes directly to the development of critical reading skills. Through interaction with digital texts, students are prompted to evaluate the credibility of sources, identify potential biases, and synthesize information from multiple perspectives, which are essential practices for higher-order literacy. When coupled with heutagogical practices, DER transforms reading into an active, inquiry-based process where students engage in deeper levels of interpretation and reflection. Thus, heutagogy and DER together create a synergistic framework: heutagogy provides the principles of learner autonomy and reflection, while DER operationalizes these principles by offering meaningful, diverse, and engaging opportunities to practice critical reading in the digital era.

Furthermore, DER offers sufficient adaptability to accommodate diverse learners' reading preferences and approaches. Its flexible design supports personalized learning pathways and allows students to engage with texts in ways that align with their individual styles. Because of its accessibility, learners can progress at their own pace, which not only promotes independent inquiry but also nurtures lifelong learning habits (Leek & Rojek, 2022). When framed within a heutagogical perspective, DER moves beyond traditional reading practices, transforming them into reflective and student-centered learning experiences. In this integration, heutagogy complements DER by encouraging learners to set personal goals, choose relevant texts, and engage in critical reflection—ultimately shaping them into autonomous and intentional readers (Alshaye, 2021; Janah et al., 2022).

Despite the promise of this combined approach, research on integrating heutagogy and DER—especially for enhancing critical reading skills in EFL Islamic higher education—remains limited. While several studies have investigated aspects of digital extensive reading, the heutagogical model, and critical reading individually, few have addressed their intersection. For example, Khoiriyah and Ilmi (2023) examined digital and reading literacy through multimodal digital extensive reading in *madrasah* (Islamic school) and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) contexts. Additional studies have explored the use of the heutagogical approach in online learning settings (Rinaldi et al., 2024) and the development of digital learning environments that promote learner independence (Chandore et al., 2024). However, limited attention has been given to how heutagogical principles specifically contribute to the development of critical reading competencies. Moreover, the practical implementation and broader implications of this approach across diverse learner contexts remain underexplored.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the integration of Digital Extensive Reading through a heutagogical lens in developing critical reading skills among EFL university students. It seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How is the heutagogy model of DER implemented in EFL Islamic higher education? (2) How does heutagogy-based DER enhance students' critical reading skills? And (3) What are the implications of implementing a heutagogy-based DER for EFL learners?

Method

The study employed a qualitative research design to explore the influence of DER within the heutagogy framework on students' critical reading abilities. The study focused on observing the implementation of heutagogy-based DER, examining how students' critical reading skills develop through this approach, and investigating its impact on EFL learners. The subjects of

this research were 35 Islamic university students enrolled in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) reading classes. The participants represented different levels of English proficiency, ranging from basic to advanced. This variation provided a heterogeneous learning context for investigating the effects of DER, integrated with the heutagogy model, on students' critical reading competency. These students participated in a series of reading activities, including selecting digital reading materials aligned with their interests and English proficiency levels, reading and annotating texts independently, analyzing arguments and evidence, discussing their interpretations with peers, and producing reflective, critical responses. They also conducted a self-assessment to monitor their progress and learning strategies.

To gather comprehensive data, a variety of qualitative data collection techniques were employed. There were document analyses, questionnaires, interviews, field notes, and literature studies. 1) In document analysis, the researcher employed reading logs, reflective journals, and student assignments and analyzed them to gain insights into students' reading patterns, preferences, and their application of critical reading strategies during DER activities. 2) The researchers developed and distributed an open-ended questionnaire, consisting of 10 questions, to collect students' feedback on their experience with the heutagogy-based DER model, focusing on their perceptions of autonomy, engagement, and critical reading development. To ensure the validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by experts in English language teaching and educational research. 3) Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 students selected purposively. The selection aimed to represent students with diverse English proficiency levels (from basic to advanced) and varied patterns of engagement and performance in the DER activities. 4) Observational field notes taken during classroom sessions where DER activities took place. These notes captured student behavior, engagement levels, and interactions during self-directed reading tasks. 5) A literature study complemented the data collection by examining existing research on the heutagogy model, DER, and critical reading in EFL contexts. This helped contextualize the findings and provided a theoretical framework for the analysis.

The collected data were analyzed using two qualitative analysis techniques: descriptive analysis and thematic analysis. First, a descriptive analysis was conducted of data from questionnaires, interviews, and field notes to identify recurring patterns and trends in students' behaviors, attitudes, and reading practices. This analysis provided a detailed description of how the heutagogy model supported the development of critical reading skills. Second, thematic analysis was applied to the interview transcripts and reflective documents to gain deeper insights into students' experiences with DER and its impact on their critical reading competency. Themes related to learner autonomy, engagement with digital texts, and the development of critical thinking were identified and interpreted.

Results

The Implementation of the Heutagogical Model of Digital Extensive Reading (DER)

The implementation of the heutagogy model in DER integrated digital reading resources with the principles of self-determined learning. DER provided students with access to a wide range of authentic digital texts. At the same time, the heutagogy model encouraged them to take ownership of their learning through autonomy, capability development, self-reflection, and non-linear learning pathways. This integration enabled students to select texts based on their interests and proficiency levels, set personal reading goals, monitor their progress, and critically engage with the ideas presented in the texts.

The interview and classroom observation data showed that the implementation of the heutagogy-based DER model began with a clear orientation to the course. In the first meeting, the lecturer introduced the course contract and clarified the distinction between extensive and intensive reading, the latter having been studied in the previous semester. This stage served to activate students' prior knowledge and prepare them to shift from reading for detailed understanding to reading for general understanding and enjoyment. Students were informed that they would have complete freedom to select reading materials according to their own interests, whether fiction or non-fiction, to help them develop independent learning. To support this, they were introduced to a variety of digital reading platforms, such as Let's Read!, American English (state.gov), The Asia Foundation, British Council, and Open Library, which allow them to navigate diverse sources and formats. These platforms provided access to diverse texts and formats, enabling students to select reading materials based on their interests and proficiency levels. This flexibility increased motivation, encouraged deeper engagement with the content, and supported the development of critical reading skills. In addition, exposure to these platforms enhanced students' capability to identify, evaluate, and use digital resources independently. Within the heutagogical framework, students were encouraged to establish their own reading goals and set personal deadlines, fostering the development of self-regulation skills. Each student was provided with an individual journal in Google Classroom to document progress, evaluate comprehension, and adjust reading strategies accordingly. As the lecturer explained, students were given a personal journal and were to determine their reading goals. Meanwhile, they are also informed to set their deadline. It helps them to develop discipline and read more books.

This statement illustrates how the lecturer promoted learner autonomy and self-regulation while encouraging students to become more disciplined and engaged readers. Google Classroom functioned as a central platform for documenting progress and facilitating self-monitoring. During each session, the lecturer acted as a facilitator, organizing peer discussions and class presentations to assess and deepen students' comprehension. Rather than relying solely on traditional comprehension checks, this activity emphasized interactive learning. She facilitated peer discussions or class presentations to evaluate students' comprehension. Students who were less familiar with the text were encouraged to raise questions that prompted deeper exploration, while those who had completed the reading contributed their interpretations and viewpoints. Through this exchange of perspectives, learners collectively constructed knowledge and engaged in critical dialogue.

After completing several books, students engaged in a structured self-reflection process facilitated by their instructor. This activity served several purposes: first, it allowed students to critically examine the appropriateness of the texts they had selected to their language abilities, personal interests, and academic goals. Second, it provided an opportunity to assess whether the goals they had set at the beginning of the reading cycle were achieved and the extent to which their chosen strategies supported those outcomes. This reflective process was framed within the principles of self-reflection and double-loop learning. Rather than simply evaluating the results superficially, students were encouraged to interrogate the reasons behind their choices, reassess the strategies they employed, and make appropriate adjustments to their future reading practices. For example, some students realized that choosing overly challenging texts hindered comprehension and motivation, prompting them to recalibrate their choices to more accessible materials. Others realized that their preference for a single genre limited their exposure to diverse perspectives, prompting them to explore alternative genres in subsequent reading cycles. Through this reflection, students not only deepen their awareness of why they read a particular text but also strengthen their ability to

adapt strategies such as skimming, close reading, or note-taking. By critically reflecting on their outcomes and approaches, they develop more purposeful and sustainable reading habits that extend beyond the classroom context.

The heutagogical model in DER allowed students to determine both what to learn and how to learn, supporting learner autonomy and non-linear learning pathways. Reading activities could be carried out at any time and place, without the need to follow a uniform list of texts. Students exercised full control over their learning sequence—deciding which book to start, what to read next, and under what conditions to read. For example, some preferred quiet environments, while others chose to read while listening to music. This freedom in learning design enabled students to personalize their learning experiences, reinforcing motivation and sustained engagement in reading.

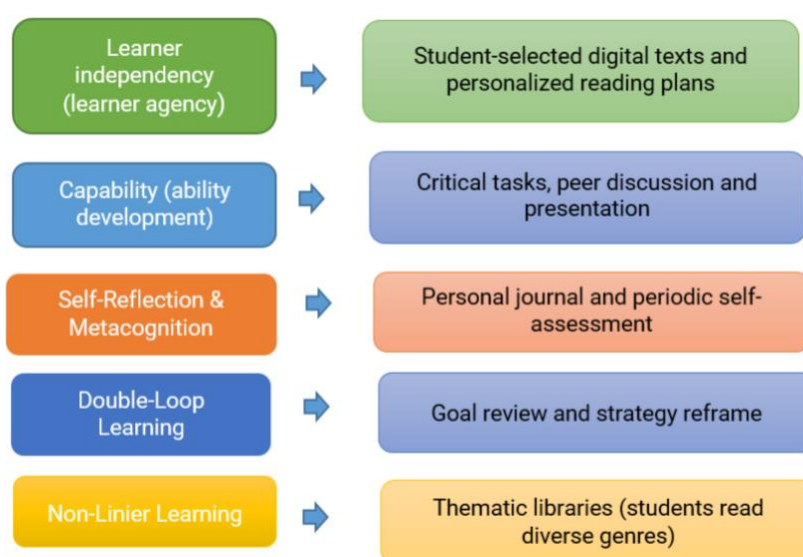


Figure1. *The Heutagogical Model in Digital Extensive Reading (DER)*

The researcher's analysis of students' reading logs, reflective journals, and assignments provided a clear picture of how the heutagogy model was implemented in the DER program and how students responded to the learning activities. The reading logs showed that students read regularly throughout the semester and selected a wide range of fiction and non-fiction texts based on their interests and English proficiency levels. For example, some students chose short stories, novels, and folktales because they enjoyed reading narratives and wanted to learn about different cultures. In contrast, others selected articles and biographies to gain factual knowledge and explore current issues. These records showed that students had the freedom to choose what they wanted to read and gradually became more thoughtful in selecting texts appropriate to their language ability and personal learning goals.

The reflective journals provided evidence of students' self-regulation and metacognitive development. In their journals, students wrote about the goals they had set, the deadlines they created, the difficulties they encountered, and the strategies they used to improve their understanding. Many students reported using rereading, note-taking, skimming, and close reading when they found a text challenging. They also reflected on whether the texts they selected were suitable for their proficiency level and whether their reading strategies were effective. This process helped students become more aware of how they learned and how they could improve their reading practices.

Student assignments, including written responses and presentation materials, showed how students applied critical reading skills. In their work, students identified the authors' viewpoints, compared ideas from different texts, evaluated supporting evidence, and connected the issues discussed in the texts to social and cultural contexts. During presentations, students explained their interpretations and justified their opinions using information from the texts. These assignments demonstrated that students moved beyond simply understanding the content to analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating information more critically. Overall, the document analysis showed that integrating DER with the heutagogy model encouraged students to read independently, reflect on their learning, and apply critical reading strategies. The findings indicate that students developed not only stronger reading habits but also greater autonomy, self-regulation, and analytical skills.

Roles of Digital Extensive Reading (DER) in Enhancing Students' Critical Reading Skills

DER involves reading a wide range of books through digital platforms, giving students significant opportunities to select materials that match their personal interests from diverse sources. Students who frequently read fiction often become more adept at addressing real-life challenges, while those who read non-fiction tend to develop stronger scientific reading habits. Both types of reading stimulate critical thinking skills, enabling learners to tackle problems from multiple perspectives (Hollis, 2023).

Responses to the open-ended questionnaire indicated that the heutagogy-based DER program broadened students' perspectives and strengthened their critical reading skills. Students reported that reading a wide range of self-selected fiction and non-fiction texts exposed them to diverse ideas, viewpoints, and cultural perspectives. This exposure encouraged them to examine information more carefully, question assumptions, and connect what they read to their own experiences. The following were students' questionnaire responses on heutagogy-based DER:

Table 1. *Students' responses to Heutagogy-based Digital Extensive Reading (DER)*

Students' Number	Students' Responses
S1, S3, S7	Reading texts from different countries helped me understand that people can have different ways of thinking and behaving. It made me more open-minded when reading about social issues.
S9, S18	Before joining this program, I usually looked at issues from only one point of view. After reading more texts, I realized that one topic can be interpreted in different ways.
S22, S25, S29, S30	Reading a variety of texts broadened my mindset. It gave me new knowledge and helped me understand the reasons behind certain cultural behaviors.
S10, S12	Reading extensively has broadened my mindset. It has given me new knowledge that changes my perspective and helps me understand the reasons behind certain cultural behaviors.
S2, S4, S5, S6, S27	Digital extensive reading changed my perspective because I learned to compare my own beliefs with the perspectives presented by different authors.
S8, S28	Reading texts from different cultures helped me understand the background and reasons behind certain behaviors and beliefs.
S17, S21, S25	"I learned to check whether the author used reliable evidence and whether the arguments were convincing."

Based on the evidence, many students became more open-minded after reading texts from different countries and cultures. They recognized that a single issue could be interpreted from multiple perspectives and developed a deeper understanding of the reasons behind certain beliefs and behaviors. Several students also reported that DER helped them compare their own views with those presented by different authors. In addition, students described improvements in their critical reading skills. They stated that they had become more attentive to authors' credibility, the quality of supporting evidence, and the strength of arguments. These responses suggest that the heutagogy-based DER program not only expanded students' intercultural awareness but also enhanced their ability to analyze, interpret, and evaluate information critically. In summary, DER broadened students' perspectives and strengthened their critical reading skills. Through exposure to texts from different countries, cultures, and authors, students became more open-minded and learned to recognize that a single issue can be interpreted from multiple perspectives. They also reported greater awareness of cultural differences and improved ability to compare their own beliefs with the viewpoints presented in the texts. In addition, several students noted that they had become more critical readers by evaluating the credibility of evidence and the strength of authors' arguments.

Based on classroom observations, students demonstrated their critical reading skills during class presentations and discussions. They compared the authors' viewpoints, evaluated the supporting evidence, and justified their interpretations with textual references. Interview data further revealed that reading texts by different authors on the same topic helped students recognize differences in argumentation and perspective. For example, one student explained that when reading two books on a similar issue, they noticed differences in argumentation and evidence, which helped them understand why one author emphasized a particular perspective while another did not. Another student stated that presenting their reading encouraged them to recheck the author's credibility and connect the ideas with broader contexts.

During presentations, audience members were encouraged to identify unclear or unusual aspects of the text and raise questions for discussion. This practice prompted presenters to defend their interpretations with logical reasoning and textual evidence. As one participant explained: "I am now starting to think more deeply and used to not taking things at face value from the source. I also know how to voice my thoughts and ask well-targeted questions" (S4, personal communication, February 2025).

In questioning sessions, presenters were required to defend their interpretations with logical reasoning, drawing connections between their personal perspectives and textual evidence. Such exchanges often escalated into debates, in which students proposed modifications to the plot and justified their choices. This process not only reinforced comprehension but also fostered imaginative thinking. As S5 noted: "Reading a lot of books has opened up my way of thinking. It provides me with fresh information that modifies my perspective. It enables me to understand the reason behind certain cultural behaviors" (S5, personal communication, February 2025).

Such responses demonstrate that DER presentations acted as a catalyst for higher-order cognitive engagement. Students were consistently required to interpret, analyze, and explain their reasoning, aligning with the upper cognitive levels of Bloom's taxonomy. These findings support the heutagogical emphasis on self-determined learning, wherein learners actively construct meaning through inquiry, peer interaction, and reflective reasoning.

The Implication of Heutagogical Model in Digital Extensive Reading (DER) Activities

This finding is based on data gathered through both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, providing a comprehensive understanding of students' experiences with the heutagogical model in DER activities. The analysis reveals that applying a heutagogical approach generates multiple positive implications for students' learning processes and attitudes toward reading.

First, the positive effect is on learner autonomy. In a heutagogy-based DER program, the traditional roles of student and teacher undergo a significant transformation. The learner is no longer a passive recipient of a reading assignment but an active agent in their learning. Students became the primary decision-makers, selecting material according to their interests, proficiency levels, and learning goals. One of the participants said, "I feel that I have freedom in deciding how I read, what I read, and why I read", (S6, personal communication, February 2025). This sense of freedom also inspires students to engage more actively in reading.

Second, the heutagogical approach reframes teachers' roles. The teacher's role changed from being the main director of learning to becoming a facilitator and mentor. Instead of giving the same reading tasks to all students, teachers focused on creating a supportive environment by offering access to reliable websites, online libraries, and a wide range of texts with different genres and levels of difficulty. In this way, teachers guided students in choosing suitable materials but still allowed them freedom of choice. Students responded well to this shift, noting that teachers acted as "guides on the side." They encouraged students to be independent but were always available when help or advice was needed. This approach gave students confidence to explore their own reading paths while knowing support was still there. As a result, the relationship between teachers and students became more collaborative and learner-centered. Students felt trusted and respected, which increased their motivation and independence. This change reflects the principles of heutagogy, in which teachers support learners in becoming more self-directed and engaged in their reading.

Third, the implication goes beyond comprehension. The nature of DER activities evolved from routine comprehension checks to more flexible and negotiated tasks. Students could demonstrate their understanding through creative outputs such as presentations and summary writing rather than being restricted to standardized tests. This flexibility reflected heutagogical ideas of learner choice and ownership, making the activities more meaningful. As student 7 noted: "Before presenting my reading book, I need to prepare and understand it thoroughly, because I know my friends will ask detailed questions" (S7, personal communication, February 2025).

The data reveal that students become aware of their level of comprehension when presenting their texts. They realize that peers who are less familiar with the material often raise specific, detailed questions that require them to clarify and justify their explanations. In some cases, presenters are even challenged to relate the content to real-life situations, which further demonstrates the depth of their understanding. Furthermore, students' reflections showed that these tasks helped them engage more deeply with the texts, analyze ideas, and connect information from different sources. Teachers also observed improvements in students' ability to think critically and relate their reading to wider issues. These results suggest that using heutagogy in DER turns reading into an active process of inquiry and reflection, while also supporting autonomy, creativity, and lifelong learning skills.

Fourth, the assessment also shifts. In the heutagogical DER model, assessment no longer relies mainly on tests and quizzes. Instead, it focuses on a more complete and ongoing

process that helps students grow. Students are not just asked to answer reading questions; they are encouraged to keep journals, write summaries, and give feedback to their peers. These activities help them become more aware of how they read, what strategies work best for them, and what areas they still need to improve. By doing this, students can also check how well they understand the texts they read.

Self-assessment and peer evaluation are very important in this model because they allow students to reflect on their progress and learn from one another. This collaborative process not only improves their comprehension but also builds confidence in their reading ability. Teachers also play a key role by giving feedback that focuses on strategies and progress rather than solely on whether answers are correct. This way, assessment becomes a tool to guide students on their learning journey, rather than just a measure of their final performance.

Discussion

The integration of heutagogy into DER underscores the transformative role of digital platforms in fostering learner autonomy and self-directed learning. Since DER is entirely facilitated through digital resources, students have abundant access to materials from platforms such as Let's Read and Open Library. This digital mediation allows learners to engage with texts flexibly, at their own pace and in varied contexts, which not only broadens their exposure to diverse genres but also empowers them to take ownership of their learning trajectories. The present study found that students valued this flexibility, reporting higher engagement and deeper comprehension when given the freedom to select texts aligned with their interests and goals. This finding resonates with Roman and Roman (2025), who argue that self-determined learning practices in higher education significantly enhance students' academic performance, particularly when learners are encouraged to direct their own pathways.

The outcomes of this study also affirm Wismaningrum et al. (2020), who claim that digital media strengthens heutagogical approaches by providing learners with tools to design, manage, and actively engage in their learning processes. Students in the present research demonstrated the ability to navigate digital texts effectively and to employ critical strategies for selecting and reflecting on their reading. This capacity for independent engagement illustrates how DER supports a shift from passive to active reading practices. Similarly, Verma and Varghese (2024) highlight that digitalization serves as one of the most powerful mechanisms for promoting self-directed learning, enabling students not only to access resources but also to exercise choice and agency in ways that traditional print-based approaches may limit.

Equally important, the findings highlight the role of digital literacy in sustaining learner autonomy, a point emphasized by Shuhidan et al (2021). They argue that digital learning must be approached with creativity, collaboration, and flexibility to maximize its benefits, which is consistent with this study's observation that learners grew more independent while also engaging collaboratively with peers and instructors. The flexibility offered by digital platforms allowed students to read a variety of texts at their own pace and in alignment with their preferred learning styles. This supports Verma and Varghese's (2024) view that heutagogy helps address diverse learning needs, ensuring that students are not confined to uniform pathways but can tailor their learning experiences. Overall, the combination of self-determined learning and digital reading practices not only enhanced comprehension and critical

engagement but also cultivated a more collaborative and autonomous academic culture in the classroom.

The findings also reveal that students who consistently engage in DER can comprehend not only the linguistic features of texts but also the deeper meanings and values embedded within them. Their comprehension is not limited to understanding the literal message but also extends to recognizing the author's intention and the text's purpose. This higher-level comprehension is closely associated with the development of critical reading skills. This result resonates with Al Roomy (2022), who argues that critical reading requires interpretive and evaluative skills that enable learners to distinguish essential from nonessential information, differentiate between fact and opinion, and assess the writer's purpose and tone. Similarly, Husna (2019) reported that the implementation of Extensive Reading (ER) significantly improved students' critical-thinking test scores, demonstrating a clear link between sustained reading practices and higher-order thinking abilities. Rakhmonova (2024) further emphasized that ER cultivates learners' reasoning, evaluative judgment, and decision-making skills. Participants in this study also acknowledged that the heutagogical DER program, with its activities and reflective components, enhanced their ability to analyze texts critically and make well-reasoned interpretations.

Brookfield (2013) emphasizes that students need to be guided in exploring the linguistic choices shaped by cultural influences in literary production. Consequently, different literary theories may provide varying interpretations of the same work. Through this process, learners develop a more critical perspective not only toward literature but also toward language as a medium of communication. In line with this, the present study also encouraged students to engage in discussions and peer presentations to test and deepen their comprehension of the reading materials.

Meanwhile, students show a positive attitude towards reading. They have a motivated attitude toward reading since they can choose their reading topics and are challenged to finish them quickly. In accordance with Permatasari and Wienanda's (2023) research, students' general reading motivation increased with increased reading practice when they enjoyed reading about themes they were already familiar with, were more proficient readers, and engaged with new material. Similarly, Yaseen et al. (2024) reported that digitally based extensive reading enhanced students' motivation. The ease of access across devices, the flexibility to learn at their own pace, and the engaging nature of digital learning contribute to this improvement.

Conclusion

This systematic analysis provides valuable evidence that the DER approach, coupled with the heutagogy model, creates a dynamic and learner-centered environment that enhances students' critical reading abilities. In practice, DER empowered students to take control of their learning by allowing them to select their reading materials, thereby fostering autonomy. The digital platforms provided a wide range of resources that encouraged students to engage deeply with diverse content. This flexible learning environment increased student engagement and promoted critical thinking skills, as they were exposed to different perspectives and learned to evaluate the credibility and biases in the materials they read. Theoretically, the study shows that combining DER with the heutagogy model effectively promotes critical reading. By emphasizing self-determined learning, students developed higher-order thinking skills such as questioning, interpreting, and evaluating information beyond simple comprehension. This

aligns with the heutagogy model, in which students take ownership of their learning process, fostering critical literacy. The results also support the notion that extensive reading, especially through digital platforms, plays a crucial role in improving language proficiency and critical thinking in EFL contexts. This study was limited by its small sample size and short duration. Future research is recommended to employ a quantitative approach with a larger, more diverse sample and more comprehensive evaluation instruments, such as reading comprehension tests.

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