

# From Teacher Beliefs to Practices: Unpacking the Benefits and Barriers of Extensive Reading Programmes in Macau Secondary Schools

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## Abstract

Extensive reading entails language learners' independent reading of abundant materials suitable for their proficiency levels. Previous studies have revealed extensive reading as effective for improving various aspects of second language (L2) proficiency. However, many Macau secondary schools have cancelled or reduced their extensive reading programmes (ERPs), prompting the need for a qualitative study to comprehend these modifications. In this case study, five L2 English teachers from different Macau secondary schools shared their beliefs and practices during semi-structured interviews. Qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts revealed all teachers supported incorporating extensive reading in their respective English curriculums; they believed students' engagement in ERPs enhanced reading fluency and comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and L2 learning motivation and confidence. However, the teachers also believed restricted time and unengaged students hindered the ERPs. The schools' possible misinterpretations of extensive reading and their potentially unrealistic expectations regarding short-term returns against limited investment in extensive reading may have contributed to the abandonment or reduction of ERPs. To engage students in ERPs, schools should allow students to choose their own reading materials, reduce the emphasis on extensive reading tests, incorporate more intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, and consider combining extensive reading with reading strategy instruction.

**Keywords:** teacher beliefs; extensive reading; L2 learning; Macau; school curriculum



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## Introduction

Previous research has demonstrated that extensive reading promotes language proficiency, vocabulary acquisition, reading fluency and comprehension, and overall language enjoyment among second language (L2) learners (Day and Bamford 2002; Nation and Waring 2019). These positive outcomes align with the non-tertiary education planning in Macau, which emphasises the significance of fostering students' soft skills such as reading comprehension (DSEDJ 2021). Despite the desirable benefits of extensive reading, there is a growing trend of Macau secondary schools discontinuing or reducing their extensive reading programmes (ERPs). This unexpected shift prompts questions about how ERPs have been incorporated into Macau secondary schools and why some ERPs were discontinued or reduced.

English teachers co-ordinate ERPs in L2 classrooms, balancing administrators' decisions and students' feedback. Teacher beliefs guide their pedagogical practices and reflection (Borg 2001). Meanwhile, various factors constantly shape teacher beliefs within a reading classroom (Borg 2003). Personal factors include teaching philosophy, teaching experience, and previous education (Farrell and Guz 2019; Johnson 1992; Shieh and Reynolds 2021). Contextual factors, including student characteristics, institutional constraints, and social or cultural norms, also constantly shape teacher beliefs (Graden 1996; Powers, Zippay, and Butler 2006; Reynolds, Shieh, and Ha 2022; Zhang and Liu 2014). Sometimes, different factors shape teacher beliefs towards distinct orientations, and this conflict can lead to teachers' struggles in implementing pedagogical strategies or inconsistencies between teacher beliefs and practices (Farrell and Guz 2019; Powers, Zippay, and Butler 2006). Thus, investigating teacher beliefs about the incorporation of ERPs in Macau secondary schools facilitates an in-depth understanding of the intricate reasons why some schools removed or reduced the ERPs despite the merits of extensive reading.

This study adopted a case study method, which allowed for an in-depth investigation of how ERPs were implemented in an authentic context (i.e., Macau secondary schools) as "a bounded system" (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007, 253). Aside from identifying and describing the objects and participants engaged in the ERPs, the researchers revealed the interactions between participants involved in the ERPs and other contextual factors (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2007). Each participant offered rich and vivid delineation of how the ERPs were incorporated and perceived at a Macau secondary school. Their sharing revolved around the benefits and challenges of incorporating extensive reading into a curriculum. These descriptions subsequently explained why some schools discontinued or reduced their ERPs. Particularly, interviews allowed for a nuanced exploration of the teachers' beliefs about ERPs as shaped by multiple personal and contextual factors. The findings of this study provide insights into the intricate connections between teachers' personal beliefs, institutional constraints, and classroom practices. From a practical perspective, these findings offer valuable references for policymakers, curriculum developers, and teacher educators,

especially those in Macau and similar educational contexts. After addressing the barriers that impede the effective implementation of ERPs, we offered practical strategies to foster a more conducive environment for extensive reading in Macau secondary school English classrooms, hoping to optimise students' L2 learning outcomes and enjoyment of reading.

## The Importance of Teacher Beliefs about English Teaching and Learning

Teacher beliefs generally refer to teachers' pedagogical propositions that they evaluate and accept as truth (Borg 2001). Teacher beliefs direct and inform instructional activities by acting as a filter for the perception of new occurrences (Pajares 1992). However, teacher beliefs may not always align with their classroom practices, and pedagogical practices may reversely shape teacher beliefs (Phipps and Borg 2009).

Previous studies on language teachers' beliefs have primarily focused on the relationship between teacher beliefs and their teaching practices. These studies have yielded varied results, revealing a complex connection between the two (e.g., Basturkmen 2012; Farrell and Bennis 2013). In Johnson's (1992) study, more than half of the 30 L2 English teachers held definite theoretical convictions reflecting a specific methodological approach to L2 teaching. Teachers with clear theoretical convictions tended to align their teaching more closely with their theoretical orientation. However, other studies have shown significant discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and teaching practices (e.g., Farrell and Lim 2005; Graden 1996). Various factors have been identified as influencing the consistency between teacher beliefs and practices, including situational constraints (Borg 2003), teacher preparation (Deal and White 2006), the school environment, and the academic and social backgrounds of the learners (Larenas, Hernández, and Navarrete 2015).

Beliefs are crucial in teachers' personal and professional lives (Luo et al. 2020). In daily classroom teaching, beliefs guide teachers' behaviour and structure their knowledge and information, such as teachers' evaluation and acceptance of new information (Borg 2005). Beliefs also impact teachers' memory processes such as how they encode and decode retrieved pedagogical events (Pajares 1992). Furthermore, teacher beliefs provide valuable insights as teachers develop a comprehensive system of personal and professional knowledge to understand their teaching environment (Vaish 2012). As teachers' professional experiences expand, their knowledge becomes a highly individualised belief system that shapes their understanding, judgement, and behaviour (Vaish 2012). Ultimately, teachers' beliefs impact their decisions and classroom practices, thereby influencing students' learning outcomes (Menon 2020). For example, in an L2 reading classroom, teachers' beliefs and practices impact students' cognitive abilities, such as setting goals for reading, applying comprehension strategies, and making inferences about an L2 text (Kuzborska 2011).

## Teacher Beliefs about Teaching L2 English Reading and Extensive Reading

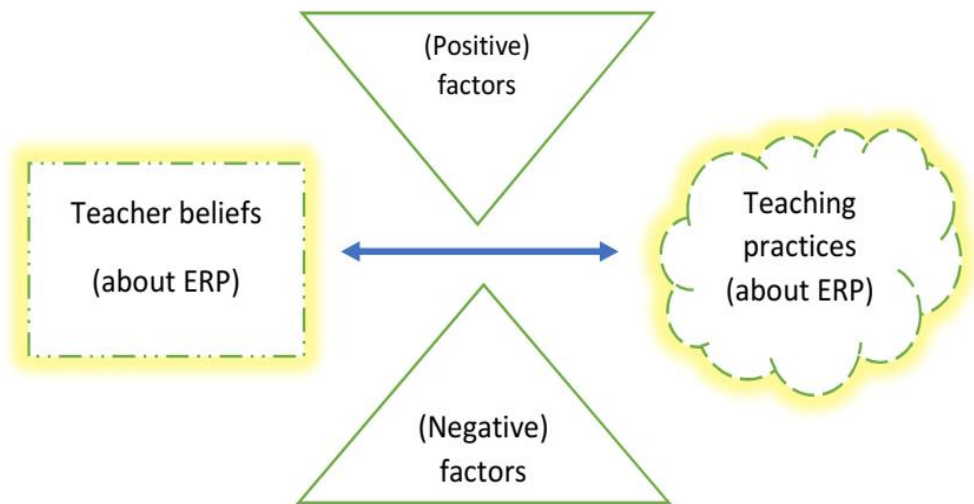
Teacher beliefs guide their classroom design and practices; the beliefs are shaped by teaching experience, literature reading, and personal interests (Shieh and Reynolds 2021). Research on the connection between teacher beliefs and classroom practices in L2 reading instruction is scarce (Farrell and Ives 2015). Existing evidence suggests that teachers' beliefs about reading influence and shape their teaching approaches within a reading classroom. Despite having the same curriculum and class hours, teachers tend to design reading lessons differently based on their beliefs about the language learning process (Khader 2012). Johnson (1992), in an early study on L2 reading instruction, found that teachers' theoretical ideas about reading instruction aligned with their theoretical orientation and literacy practices in the classroom. However, teachers' practices sometimes diverge from their beliefs as a result of situational constraints (Farrell and Guz 2019). Understanding how teachers' understanding of the language and its instruction influences their actions and methods in the classroom is crucial for improving instruction (Kahn-Horwitz 2015; Vaisman and Kahn-Horwitz 2020).

Within a reading classroom, teachers employ multiple reading activities, such as silent reading, extensive reading, and intensive reading (Nikolopoulou, Akriotou, and Gialamas 2019). Existing studies show that L2 teachers often hold positive beliefs about extensive reading and welcome the incorporation of extensive reading into their classrooms (Asraf and Ahmad 2003; Kim 2019). The expected benefits of extensive reading include enhancing students' reading skills and expanding their vocabulary knowledge (Bui and Macalister 2021; Wulyani, Widiati, and El Khoiri 2022). Teachers also hold certain beliefs about how to make extensive reading effective in facilitating students' L2 acquisition, such as the usage of keyword lists and dictionaries during extensive reading (e.g., Huang 2013; Kim 2019). They also shape their extensive reading lessons based on their beliefs regarding extensive reading and L2 acquisition (Ro 2016).

However, teachers also encounter difficulties in implementing their beliefs in their pedagogical practices; they may become concerned about issues such as fitting extensive reading into limited class hours or engaging students in extensive reading (e.g., Farrell and Guz 2019; Sun 2017). Previous studies have shown that teachers' choices of learning materials are often influenced by factors such as class hours, students' language proficiency, and the constraints of educational contexts (Graden 1996; Farrell and Guz 2019). Additionally, the pressures of examinations and epistemological beliefs in the broader educational landscape often shape teachers' classroom practices (Sun 2017). Examination results frequently play a decisive role in shaping the teaching practices aimed at improving students' reading skills over an extended period (e.g., Zhang and Liu 2014).

## Theoretical Framework

Drawing upon existing research evidence, the authors acknowledge the paramount importance of teacher beliefs and the intricate relationships between these beliefs and teaching practices. Consequently, a theoretical framework was developed for this study, as depicted in Figure 1. Dashes were incorporated to account for the variability and inherent difficulty in precisely defining the scope of teacher beliefs and teaching practices. Two triangles symbolise the interplay of positive and negative factors in constant competition, shaping diverse teacher beliefs and teaching practices.



**Figure 1:** Theoretical framework of this study

The significance of this case study research lies in the examination of the relationship between teacher beliefs and the decision-making process of secondary schools regarding the discontinuation of their ERPs. By exploring the underlying factors and motivations that led to the closure of such programmes, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the influence of teachers' beliefs and the broader educational context on the development of educational policies and practices. Understanding why certain secondary schools choose to terminate their extensive reading initiatives is crucial for educational policymakers, administrators, and practitioners, as it can inform future programme development, implementation, and sustainability efforts. By shedding light on the complex interplay between teacher beliefs, curriculum constraints, institutional pressures, and students' learning experiences, this research has the potential to contribute to the enhancement of literacy instruction in secondary schools and support evidence-based decision-making processes in educational settings. The following research questions guided the case study:

RQ1: What are the diverse beliefs held by Macau secondary school English teachers regarding the integration of ERPs into the curriculum?

RQ2: What benefits and challenges related to the implementation of an ERP in a secondary school curriculum have teachers perceived?

RQ3: What suggestions have teachers proposed for implementing the ERP in a secondary school curriculum?

## Methodology

This study employed a case study approach, one of the most used and critical qualitative methodologies in educational research (Yazan 2015). Case study research allows for a comprehensive understanding of contexts, communities, and individuals, rather than merely providing isolated “evidence” (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier 2013, 6). A case study enabled an in-depth understanding of the implementation of ERPs at Macau secondary schools and the intricate reasons that led to a de-emphasis on ERPs at some schools (Stake 1995). Specifically, the study approached the teachers’ beliefs about ERPs from a constructivist perspective, relying heavily on the participants’ own views of the investigated situation (Creswell and Creswell 2018). The data collection and analysis process aligned with this perspective. Open-ended questions asked during semi-structured interviews were used to elicit participants’ beliefs about ERP practices in Macau secondary schools. These beliefs were shaped by participants’ interactions within an ERP and influenced by their social, cultural, and historical backgrounds (Creswell and Creswell 2018). The aim of the data analysis was not to establish an absolute reality of ERPs in Macau secondary schools, but to gain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the status, benefits, and challenges associated with implementing an ERP (Stake 1995). The following sections provide further details on the research context, participants, and procedures for data collection and analysis.

## The Context

The present study focused on ERPs implemented in secondary schools in Macau, a city located in southern China. Macau has a complex linguistic ecology due to its “ethnically” diverse population. Most of the population (89.2%) comprises different “ethnic Chinese groups” (DSEC 2022). Other significant groups include Portuguese descendants from the colonial era and immigrants from Southeast Asia. In terms of the dominant languages spoken, the population primarily uses Cantonese (81%). Other commonly spoken languages include various Chinese dialects (5.4%), Mandarin (4.5%), and English (3.6%; DSEC 2022). Although English does not make up a significant proportion of the usual languages spoken in Macau, a considerable percentage of the population (22.7%) claim fluency in English (DSEC 2022). This figure has been increasing since the turn of the millennium, in line with the growing presence of English in various domains, such as media, business, and tourism (Botha and Moody 2020). Local educational institutions have also observed an increased

emphasis on English. English is introduced as a subject from the first year of primary school. Many institutions, from primary schools to higher education institutions, have adopted English as either the sole or one of the mediums of instruction (MoI) (Botha and Moody 2020).

For this study, the five participants were teachers from different schools. Four teachers came from secondary schools that used English as the MoI, while one teacher was from a Chinese-MoI secondary school. The participants' schools employed different approaches to incorporate an ERP into their curriculum. In terms of time allocation, four schools dedicated weekly class time to the ERP, while one school allocated 15 minutes per weekday for students to engage in extensive reading activities. The ERPs also involved additional activities, such as discussions and role-plays related to the graded readers. Two schools utilised tests to assess students' progress in the ERPs. At the time of the interviews, three participants' schools had discontinued the ERPs, and one school had reconstructed it as a take-home activity. Only one participant's school still maintained the ERP as part of the curriculum and reserved class time for extensive reading activities.

### **Participants**

Five English teachers from Macau secondary schools (3 females and 2 males) were recruited by convenient sampling. All participants were recruited because they had experiences with an ERP in their secondary school. Four participants were recruited from the first author's network; the first author is an English teacher educator at a university in Macau and a supervisor for pre-service English teachers during their teaching practicums. One participant was recruited through the distribution of an online social media post. The length of the teaching experiences of the five participants varied from three to seven years. Details of participants' demographic and teaching-related information are provided in Table 1.

All participants joined the interviews voluntarily. Before the interviews, all participants were informed of the purpose and background of the study, the confidentiality of their information, and the autonomy for them to withdraw from the research at any time. Participants further confirmed their understanding of the issues by signing a consent form.

**Table 1:** Demographic and teaching-related information of participants

Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Length of Teaching (Years)	Medium of Instruction at School
Emily	F	25	3	English
Iris	F	25	3	English
Paul	M	25	4.5	Chinese
Ted	M	27	3	English
Yanni	F	32	7	English

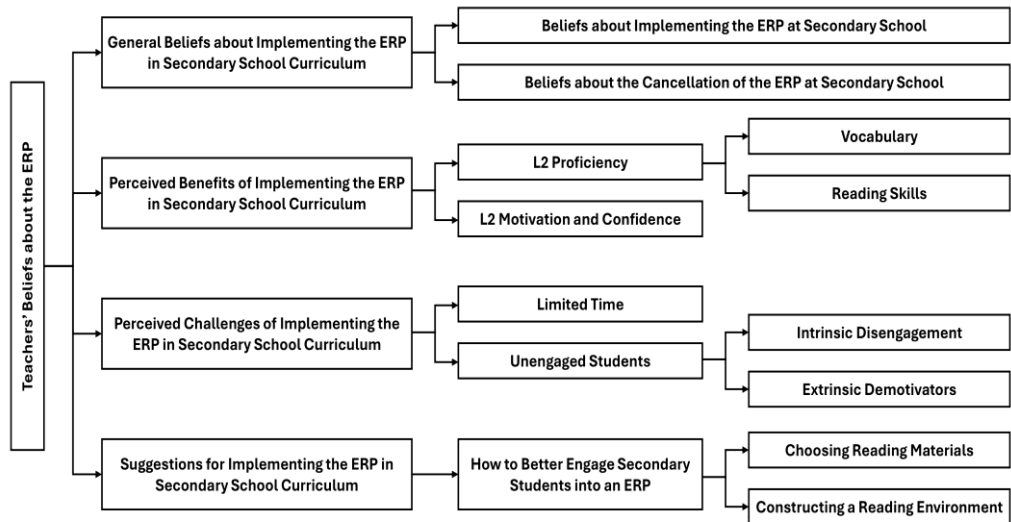
### Data Analysis

The first author conducted all interviews for this study, totalling over four hours. With participant consent, interview recordings were transcribed and meticulously checked for accuracy, resulting in 21,826 words. The findings of this study were derived exclusively from a thorough qualitative content analysis (QCA) of the interview transcriptions. Thus, this study employed data-driven approaches for data analysis. The construction of the coding frame followed the QCA guidelines outlined by Schreier (2012). Initially, the second author read twice through the interview transcriptions from each participant, taking notes on how the content related to the research questions. This process facilitated the identification of relevant and irrelevant materials, which served as a foundation for subsequent coding. The identification of relevant and irrelevant materials was inclined towards inclusivity on the relevant side to minimise any potential loss of data.

Next, four themes were identified from the relevant materials to address the research questions: 1) General Beliefs about Implementing the ERP in the Secondary School Curriculum (e.g., whether there was support or opposition to the idea of implementing the ERP); 2) Perceived Benefits of Implementing the ERP in the Secondary School Curriculum; 3) Perceived Challenges of Implementing the ERP in the Secondary School Curriculum; 4) Suggestions for Implementing the ERP in the Secondary School Curriculum. The themes fulfilled the requirements for constructing the coding frame, namely, unidimensionality, mutual exclusiveness, exhaustiveness, and saturation (Schreier 2012).

Subsequently, the second author developed hierarchical subcategories. These subcategories enriched and specified the four themes by listing examples or providing rationales (Schreier 2012). To develop subcategories, the second author first summarised each piece of relevant information to serve as a potential subcategory. Subsequently, similar paraphrases were grouped into a single category, ensuring mutual exclusiveness among the subcategories. Figure 2 presents the details of the identified subcategories. To ensure coding reliability, the second author coded the materials again two weeks after the initial coding. The intra-rater reliability, representing the degree of agreement between the two coding instances, was determined to be 91.5%, indicating good qualitative reliability (Miles and Huberman 1994).





**Figure 2:** Identified themes of participants' beliefs about the ERPs

## Results

### General Beliefs about Implementing an ERP in a Secondary School Curriculum

Participants' general beliefs about implementing an ERP in a secondary school curriculum included two subcategories: 1) beliefs about implementing the ERP at the secondary school level, and 2) beliefs about the cancellation of the ERP at their respective schools. The first aspect focused on participants' broad beliefs about incorporating an ERP into a secondary school curriculum. The second aspect emerged because, in this study, four participants' schools (all except Ted's) had either discontinued an ERP or replaced it with homework activities. Therefore, participants also shared their beliefs about the cancellation of the ERPs at their schools.

All participants held a positive belief about embracing extensive reading in the secondary school curriculum. Emily and Iris believed that the ERP provided students with an ideal learning environment that resembled natural language acquisition. Paul, Ted, and Yanni recognised the valuable English meaning-focused input from extensive reading. Although the ERP might not benefit all students equally, as motivation and English proficiency were determining factors (as mentioned by Paul, Ted, and Yanni), all participants expressed a positive stance towards including the ERP in the secondary school curriculum.

Among the four participants whose schools had cut or replaced their ERPs, Iris, Paul, and Yanni expressed regret over its absence. The removal of the ERP deprived students

of opportunities to engage with authentic and interesting readings, which could enhance their interest in English. Yanni's school had restructured the ERP as take-home homework activities. Yanni directly expressed her regret, saying, "I think it is a pity that we are not doing it [extensive reading] in class." Iris shared her sadness, stating:

For us English teachers, we are quite sad about that. Because I think it [an ERP] is a way for students to read for leisure or pleasure in English. We want them to be more interested in English. ... This (ERP) is a way during the lesson.

Paul believed that the ERP should "come back" because it provides valuable opportunities for students to engage in "coherent and meaningful" reading, which is lacking in traditional (intensive) reading classes that primarily use short articles. Emily did not express complaints about the cancellation since she believed the ERP at her school was ineffective and unappealing to students. However, she welcomed an effective ERP that would allocate more reading time for students at school and allow them to independently choose books.

### **Perceived Benefits of Implementing the ERP in Secondary School Curriculum**

Participants shared two perceived benefits of the ERPs: 1) L2 proficiency enhancement, and 2) L2 motivation and confidence. L2 proficiency enhancement referred to students' reading skills and vocabulary enhancement because of extensive reading. Three participants mentioned that extensive reading improved their students' reading fluency and comprehension. Iris noted that her students were able to "read faster and get the information faster". Emily and Paul also shared similar opinions. Iris and Paul further stated that the ERP enhanced students' critical thinking skills, such as understanding the connotation of a sentence and analysing a character, making extensive reading more engaging for students. In addition to the improvement in English reading proficiency, four participants indicated that secondary students acquired vocabulary knowledge from extensive reading. Emily was surprised to see her students able to infer the meaning of unknown words using the contexts in which they occurred. Iris recalled that students became familiar with words closely related to the story topics, such as "vampire" in horror stories. Paul mentioned that activities in the ERP, such as class discussions and essay writing, also reinforced students' vocabulary acquisition. Likewise, Paul's students used words they learned from extensive reading during class discussion. The use of new words reinforced the students' word knowledge.

The teachers also believed the ERPs boosted students' L2 motivation and confidence. As many of the ERPs used diverse reading materials, this placed less restriction on student evaluations (Nation and Waring 2019). At some schools, the increased variety of reading materials attracted students and enhanced their motivation to read. Iris mentioned that her school purposely chose reading materials, such as horror stories, that appealed to secondary students and sparked their motivation to learn English. Paul was pleased to see that the ERP encouraged students to have fun and independently explore through reading, rather than feeling stressed and pressured by test-oriented learning. In

addition to the diverse reading materials, the relaxed learning atmosphere of the ERP reduced students' stress and increased their confidence in using English. For example, Emily observed that students felt more comfortable expressing their opinions in English during ERP discussions because the focus was not solely on how much they learned from the texts or how accurate their understanding was. However, Yanni noted that discussions could still be somewhat stressful for students with limited vocabulary who struggled to express their opinions. Role-play, on the other hand, was more inclusive for students with different English proficiency levels. When role-playing, students with lower English proficiency only needed to read the scripts instead of constructing their own English sentences. Iris observed that emotions and actions compensated for language deficiencies during the role-plays, allowing her students to speak English confidently and feel more relaxed. Paul agreed that role-plays engaged low-proficiency students since it only required reading the scripts. Students who did not score high in English could excel in role-plays and gain more confidence in learning English.

### **Perceived Challenges of Implementing an ERP in a Secondary School Curriculum**

Although the participants expressed willingness to incorporate extensive reading into their instruction, they identified two main challenges in integrating extensive reading into their school's curriculum. One challenge was the difficulty in allocating sufficient time for the ERP. All participants expressed concerns about the limited time available, both inside and outside the classroom. Within the school setting, the ERP often had to compete with other courses and extracurricular activities, resulting in insufficient time allocated to it. Four participants even reported the complete cancellation of or reduced attention to the ERP in their schools due to the introduction of a new government-mandated course. Even before the cancellation, the duration of the extensive reading class was insufficient. Emily wished she could engage in discussions with her students about the value of certain books, but the limited 15 minutes allocated for extensive reading made it nearly impossible. Ted also expressed the desire for more class time to allow for further discussions. Moreover, students often deprioritised the ERP during their extracurricular time if it was not assigned as homework or graded. With various tasks and tests to handle, students struggled to find dedicated time for extensive reading. Iris mentioned that students were so busy that they did not even have time to listen to English songs (a suggested outside class activity). Emily added that during finals week she reluctantly allowed students to focus on studying for examinations during the allocated ERP time, acknowledging the importance of tests for students at that time.

Another shared challenge among the participants was the difficulty in engaging students in the ERP. Not all students were motivated to read, and some even used the allocated time to do homework or take a nap. Emily had to "force" students to read in such cases. Ted also faced a similar experience where students showed little progress in reading at home despite his encouragement. Intrinsic and extrinsic factors contributed to students' disengagement in the ERPs. Intrinsic demotivators included a lack of confidence in reading in English and a resistance to reading itself. Some students, especially those

with lower proficiency, found extensive reading daunting and quickly lost interest. Additionally, Emily and Iris observed that some students simply had no interest in reading. In Emily's class, some students preferred more interactive ways of learning English, such as watching videos, rather than reading. Iris noticed that although a few students had good reading habits, they still preferred to scroll through their phones during the allocated time instead of choosing to engage in extensive reading. Consequently, if not compelled to read, students would disregard extensive reading. Extrinsic demotivators further exacerbated students' disengagement, such as inappropriate reading materials and tests. Schools sometimes selected reading materials that were overwhelming, too difficult, or uninteresting to students, resulting in information overload or boredom. Emily, Iris, and Ted noted that students had difficulty digesting extensive reading materials within the limited time. Ted also found that students were uninterested in the graded readers approved by the school, considering them boring and unsuitable for their age group. Furthermore, tests used by Paul's and Ted's schools to assess student reading progress and learning outcomes seemed to undermine the effectiveness of the ERPs. To help students, these teachers would summarise the content for students, creating a perception among students that reading was unnecessary since the teachers would ensure their passing grades. As Ted expressed, tests transformed extensive reading into an activity more akin to intensive reading.

### **Suggestions for Implementing the ERP in Secondary School Curriculum**

All participants offered suggestions focused on engaging students in the ERP. Four participants (Emily, Iris, Ted, and Yanni) provided insights on how to choose appropriate reading materials. They emphasised that the materials should align with students' interests (Emily and Ted). Ted noted that his school assigned graded readers that were too simplistic for his students, who were eager to explore more mature content. This mismatch demotivated them. However, when Ted allowed students to choose their own reading materials, they became more attentive and engaged. Another suggestion was to provide a variety of reading materials (Emily and Iris). Iris's school utilised various materials, including reading materials, tickets, or recipes, to diversify the reading experience and enhance student engagement. Emily observed that her students were less resistant to looking up words in disciplines other than English when English served as a medium rather than the sole focus. She explained:

When we force them to learn English, they will be like, "Oh, I do not want to learn it."  
But when they are in other subjects taught in English, when they are not forced to learn, they will be like, "Oh, English is just a tool."

Two participants (Ted and Yanni) also emphasised the importance of aligning the difficulty of reading materials with students' English proficiency. Students lost interest in incomprehensible books.

The participants also suggested creating an encouraging reading environment to preserve students' reading motivation. Emily, Iris, Paul, and Yanni highlighted the role of teachers. They recommended introducing books to students prior to reading and leading discussions afterwards. Teachers should act as a guide and facilitator who sparks students' interest and encourages in-depth thinking. Ted further stated that teachers should relinquish more autonomy to students in the ERP, and teachers should not force their students to read:

It is very important for the students to have a fun reading atmosphere. It is totally free to come and go. If today you are tired, you can just not read. ... I generally do not want to make them feel it is difficult while reading the stories because that will seriously demotivate them from reading more English.

He also suggested eliminating tests, which were detrimental to students' intrinsic motivation. Since Ted was obliged to have all the students pass the extensive reading tests, he needed to "go over the book with them [Ted's students] comprehensively". However, this behaviour made extensive reading "more or less like intensive reading". His students also became unmotivated to read the books since they read only for the test, and they knew Ted would help them pass the tests by thoroughly reviewing the contents of the books.

## Discussion

This study aimed to understand more through a lens of secondary school English teachers' beliefs about ERPs in Macau secondary schools and why some schools discontinued their ERPs. Five English teachers from different secondary schools in Macau shared their beliefs during semi-structured interviews. Based on the content analysis of the interview transcripts, the researchers uncovered the perceived benefits and challenges of incorporating ERPs at Macau secondary schools. The interpretations of these beliefs shed light on the intricate factors that led certain schools to terminate their ERPs.

All participants held a positive belief about incorporating extensive reading at schools. They believed that extensive reading benefits students' L2 learning by enhancing L2 proficiency and L2 motivation and confidence. L2 proficiency referred to students' L2 vocabulary knowledge and reading ability. Students picked up new words through repetitive encounters and rich contextual clues in the reading input (Nation 2014). Various extended activities such as discussions further reinforced students' acquired knowledge of words. The participants' perceived benefits of the ERPs were consistent with existing findings, revealing the ERPs promoted L2 reading fluency and comprehension (Nuttall 1996; Vaughn et al. 2019), and vocabulary learning (Ateek 2021). Besides, the participants regarded extensive reading as motivating students' L2 learning (Nikolopoulou, Akriotou, and Gialamas 2019). Compared to English textbooks, the teachers believed that varied and attractive ERP reading materials would motivate some students to read (Mikami 2017). Students, especially those less proficient

L2 learners, require an encouraging environment for L2 use and practice (Asraf and Ahmad 2003). The relaxing ambiance during engagement in ERP extended activities further motivated some students to use English more confidently since it required a lower level of proficiency where mistakes were tolerated.

Though beneficial, incorporating extensive reading into the schools' curriculum was not easy. One major problem in the ERPs perceived by participants was student engagement, especially at the beginning of the programmes. Against an idealistic expectation, students were not necessarily motivated extensive readers (Calero Sánchez and Gavilánez 2017). Students are motivated to read suitable and attractive materials, but lose interest in boring and demanding reading materials (Nation and Waring 2019). Students also are motivated when they find extensive reading meaningful and rewarding, but deprioritise extensive reading if they attach little value to it or perceive their schools as devaluing the ERP (Johnson 1992; Shih and Reynolds 2015). The teachers shared approaches that helped them incorporate the ERP in their schools, such as allowing students to choose appropriate reading materials and constructing an encouraging reading environment. They proposed using readings that varied in style and content. The readings should also suit students' L2 proficiency. Teachers should introduce the readers to students and answer their questions promptly. Teachers should not impede students when they are engaged in reading.

However, participants also mentioned that these suggestions were hard to achieve due to situational constraints (Borg 2003). Their enthusiasm deflated due to school policies, curriculum mandates, and test pressure, which forced them to act differently from their beliefs (Larenas, Hernández, and Navarrete 2015). When some students used the time allocated to the ERP for test revision, Emily acquiesced to this behaviour since she understood their test pressure. Ted had to ask his students to read books that he believed would disinterest them because his school's English curriculum panel did not offer any flexibility. He also reviewed the contents of the books with his students since he noticed that most students did not read and were likely to fail the tests the school required that he administer. Though he understood this behaviour was against the nature of extensive reading and did little good to his students' English development, he still engaged in such questionable practices as there was the expectation that students should pass examinations that covered the contents of the graded readers.

Besides student engagement, another major problem of incorporating ERPs in Macau secondary school curriculums was time. First, the time reserved for the ERPs was inadequate, which made extended extensive reading activities impossible. The struggle of schools to allocate enough time for extensive reading has been a common dilemma for ERPs in many contexts (Wulyani, Widiati, and El Khoiri 2022). On the one hand, the school curriculum is already packed (Ateek 2021). On the other hand, compared to other programmes or activities, the benefits demonstrated by the ERP may fail to convince administrators to incorporate it into school curriculums. Because extensive reading requires long-term consistent input for its benefits to unfold (Nation and Waring

2019), judging the learning from extensive reading after a short period makes its outcome appear less fruitful than decontextualised language-focused learning and teaching (Webb 2009). However, few schools in this study reserved adequate time for students' reading, which should make up 25% of an English course (Nation 2013). Nor did the schools aim to provide an adequate amount of meaning-focused reading input, which should equate to one to two graded readers every week or two (Nation 2013). The "ineffectiveness" of extensive reading was exacerbated by schools not measuring key learning outcomes from extensive reading, such as reading fluency and reading motivation. The schools may also have failed to see students' overall growth in L2 vocabulary size or mastery of vocabulary levels since they only measured specific targeted vocabulary words that appeared in pre-selected novels (Ma and Reynolds 2023; Reynolds and Shih 2019). In this case, some Macau schools became disappointed at the learning outcomes as reflected by the English test scores, resulting in a devaluation of extensive reading. This devaluation made it even less likely that the schools invested adequate effort into extensive reading for its merits to unfold, which resulted in a vicious cycle.

These contextual constraints resulted in ERPs being the first to be cut or altered when any extra time was required for curriculum revisions. Since the government required enhanced time allocation for physical and art education, some schools sacrificed extensive reading time for sporting and cultural activities. Despite its benefits, only one school reserved its ERP. Three participants reported that their schools had cancelled their ERPs. One reported the ERP became a take-home project, where students were asked to read only one book per semester.

## Implications

Nation (2013) suggests that adding an ERP is the most important change that a teacher can make to improve an English course, as extensive reading provides both meaning-focused input and fluency development. However, the removal or alteration of an ERP, as observed in some Macau secondary schools, eliminates a valuable source of meaning-focused input and fluency practice for students' L2 learning. While this study advocates for the restoration of ERPs in Macau secondary schools, it is essential to consider adaptive strategies that teachers can employ in the face of ERP discontinuation to ensure that the benefits of extensive reading are not entirely lost.

One of the primary challenges to the implementation and restoration of ERPs in Macau secondary schools is time. In many cases, schools have replaced ERPs with other subjects, which further complicates efforts to reintroduce them. As a response, one possible solution observed was to consider extensive reading as a take-home activity, where students read at their convenience. Although class time is precious, assigning extensive reading as a take-home task allows students to incorporate reading into their busy daily lives, which can enhance intrinsic motivation through increased autonomy. Teachers can play a crucial role here by supervising students' reading regularly to ensure consistent engagement. While a few initial lessons could be dedicated to guiding

students on how to engage in extensive reading effectively, this practice can quickly transition to a take-home activity. Teachers might use reading journals to monitor students' progress and provide supportive feedback, ensuring that students remain committed to their reading practice.

Moreover, the use of online platforms such as the MoodleReader plug-in (<https://moodlereader.com/>) can facilitate this process by offering timed quizzes that students can complete at home (Robb and Kano 2013). This tool, supported by the Extensive Reading Foundation (<https://erfoundation.org>), allows teachers to monitor students' comprehension of self-selected graded readers, combining the accountability of an ERP with the flexibility of home reading. The integration of such technology, along with reading journals, enables teachers to maintain a level of supervision and support that would typically be provided within a structured ERP, thus compensating for the lack of classroom time dedicated to extensive reading.

The perceived ineffectiveness of extensive reading for L2 learning remains a concern in Macau secondary schools, largely due to the pressure for immediate, measurable outcomes. While it is reasonable for schools to expect demonstrable learning results from students' engagement in extensive reading, it is important to recognise that such outcomes often require time to manifest. Therefore, schools should consider more longitudinal assessment methods that accurately capture the benefits of extensive reading over time. Standardised English tests, which are predominately textbook-centric, may not fully reveal the improvements in reading fluency, comprehension, and motivation that extensive reading fosters. These assessments should be supplemented or replaced with measures that better align with the goals of extensive reading, such as the Vocabulary Size Test (Nation and Beglar 2007), the Updated Vocabulary Levels Test (Webb, Sasao, and Ballance 2017), and "speed readings for ESL learners" (Millett 2017). Additionally, integrating reading strategy instruction, particularly for less proficient readers, can further support students' comprehension and make extensive reading more effective, even in the absence of a formal ERP (Shih, Chern, and Reynolds 2018).

Student autonomy in selecting reading materials is another critical factor in maintaining motivation and responsibility in extensive reading (Day and Bamford 2022). Students with higher levels of autonomy are more motivated readers and demonstrate higher levels of reading engagement (Li et al. 2021). The current study found that most teachers reported that their schools either assigned specific class readers or provided a limited reading list, which may not align with students' interests or proficiency levels. To address this issue, schools should allow students more freedom in choosing their books, better catering to the varied interests and proficiency levels of students. Additionally, schools can match books to learners' proficiency using tools such as the Updated Vocabulary Levels Test (Extensive Reading Foundation n.d.; Webb, Sasao, and Ballance 2017), ensuring that students are not only motivated but also appropriately challenged.



Furthermore, the study highlights the drawbacks of requiring students to pass tests on assigned reading materials, a practice that often turns extensive reading into a burdensome task rather than an enjoyable one. Students' perspectives towards ERPs are shaped by their schooling environments (Johnson 1992). In some cases, the focus on passing examinations diminishes students' motivation, shifting the goal of reading from enjoyment to mere academic obligation. To mitigate this, schools should consider replacing mandatory examinations with more reflective and less intrusive assessments, such as reading journals and MoodleReader quizzes (Robb and Kano 2013).

The goal of testing in the context of extensive reading should be to facilitate students' understanding of their progress and to inform teachers about their students' development (Nation and Waring 2019). Such assessments should be constructive, focusing not solely on comprehension and vocabulary gains but also on recognising the students who read the most or demonstrate a high level of engagement with their reading (Stoeckel, Reagan, and Hann 2012). Schools should aim to build a motivating reading environment that acknowledges multiple definitions of a successful extensive reader, celebrating diverse achievements such as reading volume, engagement, and enjoyment alongside traditional academic metrics.

In addition to these strategies, schools might consider other initiatives to foster a culture of reading, such as setting clearly quantified reading goals, encouraging the use of reading logs, and organising shared book circles (McLean and Poulshock 2018; Suk 2017). Workshops held by school librarians and field trips to local libraries could further inspire students, highlighting the enjoyment and value of reading beyond the classroom. By implementing these adaptive strategies, teachers and schools can continue to support students' language development through extensive reading, even in the absence of a formal ERP.

## Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, this research explored the adoption and discontinuation of ERPs solely from the teachers' perspectives. Obtaining consent from administrators was challenging, as they might be reluctant to discuss the discontinued ERPs due to concerns about reflecting poorly on their decision-making. Additionally, ethical hurdles prevented the collection of students' opinions. However, teachers serve as intermediaries between administrators and students, and their beliefs may partially compensate for the absence of direct insights from these other stakeholders. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that certain beliefs about ERPs held by students and administrators could be better understood through first-hand interviews.

Second, while this study aimed to understand both teacher beliefs and practices regarding ERPs, it is important to note that the practices discussed are based on teachers' reported experiences rather than direct observations of what occurs in classrooms. This distinction highlights a limitation in capturing the full scope of ERP implementation, as

reported practices may not always align with actual classroom activities. Future research could address this gap by including observation to compare reported practices with observed ones, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how ERPs are implemented in practice.

Lastly, this study did not investigate all Macau secondary schools, instead focusing on a 10% sample of schools, with a single teacher representing each of the five schools. This limited scope means that other concerns or best practices in Macau schools may not have been revealed through the interviews conducted in this study. Future studies should consider conducting surveys across all schools to identify the most common challenges and problems related to ERPs. Additionally, purposive sampling could be used to conduct more extensive interviews with all teachers at schools that demonstrate best practices in ERP implementation.

## Conclusions

This study investigated how ERPs were realised in secondary schools in Macau and why some discontinued their ERPs through a conceptual lens of teachers' beliefs about and challenges of incorporating ERPs into their curriculums. Five teachers from different schools shared their beliefs, upon which the researchers conducted data-driven coding that led to the identification of four major themes on these teachers' beliefs about ERPs. The teachers expressed positive beliefs about incorporating extensive reading into the curriculum, highlighting benefits for students such as improved reading fluency and comprehension, vocabulary knowledge, and L2 motivation and confidence. However, constrained time and unengaged students hindered the ERPs. The schools struggled to allocate sufficient time due to a packed curriculum. Besides, not all students were naturally motivated readers. Undesirable approaches, such as limited book choices and mandatory tests, further discouraged students. Addressing these challenges, teachers believed that they could engage students in extensive reading by allowing free choice for reading materials and offering more diverse options. They also suggested constructing a more encouraging environment by introducing books to students and not intervening too much in students' reading. However, teachers believed that institutional constraints made these suggestions hard to implement as they needed to comply with school administrators' decisions. Taking these findings on board, we offered up several teaching and learning implications for local Macau secondary schools to consider that would allow the reintroduction of ERPs into their curriculums.

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## Additional Information

Additional information about the interviews and the questionnaire is available on request from the first author.

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