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Research Article

ESP Students' Reading Motivation at a Vietnamese University: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract
Reading proficiency is central to academic success in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) settings, yet motivation to read discipline-specific texts remains underexplored among non-English majors in Vietnam. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory and the Reading Motivation Questionnaire for English as a Foreign Language (RMQ-EFL), this study investigated the reading motivation of 416 Economic Law students enrolled in a compulsory "English for Economic Law" course at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City. The RMQ-EFL framework specifies five factors: three intrinsic (reading efficacy, reading enjoyment, involvement) and two extrinsic (recognition, compliance). An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was employed, combining a quantitative survey (N = 416) with follow-up semi-structured interviews (N = 20) to explain the survey patterns. Descriptive statistics, paired-samples *t*-tests, and independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted in SPSS 27, and the interview data were analyzed thematically. The results revealed that extrinsic motivation significantly exceeded intrinsic motivation, with compliance recording the highest mean and reading efficacy the lowest. No statistically significant differences emerged between male and female students on either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation. The qualitative findings clarified these patterns: students' strong compliance orientation reflected Vietnamese cultural values emphasizing respect for authority, diligence, and academic responsibility, along with grade- and graduation-related pressures, whereas their low reading efficacy stemmed from difficulties with specialized legal vocabulary and limited confidence in comprehending complex legal texts. Intrinsic engagement nonetheless emerged when reading materials were perceived as personally relevant or career-oriented. These findings suggest that ESP instruction should build on students' existing compliance while fostering more autonomous motivation through career-relevant reading materials, systematic vocabulary support, and strategy-based instruction. The study contributes empirical evidence on how cultural and institutional contexts shape ESP reading motivation in Asian higher education.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, Extrinsic Motivation, Intrinsic Motivation, Reading Motivation, Self-Determination Theory, Vietnamese EFL Learners

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, students face an unprecedented volume of information, making strong reading skills essential for academic success and lifelong learning. Because L2 reading requires processing unfamiliar language while sustaining comprehension, motivation becomes crucial for learners' engagement and persistence (Songnuan & Nomnian, 2023). Reading motivation is commonly viewed as multidimensional, reflecting learners' purposes for reading, self-efficacy beliefs, and intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for engagement (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). When motivation is weak, learners may disengage and experience poorer learning outcomes.

This issue is especially relevant for underprepared learners, who may avoid challenging texts when linguistic proficiency or background knowledge is limited (Hayikaleng et al., 2016). In Vietnam, many non-English majors report constrained English reading skills and limited discipline-related knowledge in English, which can hinder comprehension in ESP courses (Thuong & Thuy, 2018). Such conditions may encourage more extrinsic forms of reading motivation, as learners often read to meet requirements or obtain grades rather than for interest (Komiyama, 2013).

The need to examine reading motivation is heightened in ESP, where reading is tied to discipline-specific genres and professional purposes (Belcher, 2006). In Vietnam, ESP provision has expanded rapidly in response to higher-education and workforce demands (Le & Hoang, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2020). Within ESP, legal English is particularly consequential because interpretive accuracy matters, and ambiguity in contracts can contribute to disputes and financial costs (Benoliel, 2017). Accordingly, ESP scholars emphasize context-sensitive course design grounded in learners' target tasks and needs analysis (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998).

Despite this relevance, motivation in Vietnamese ESP contexts, especially among non-English majors, remains underexplored (Hong, 2025). Relatedly, recent work on non-English majors in Vietnam has examined demotivating factors in compulsory EFL programmes through a Self-Determination Theory lens, reporting that the perceived irrelevance of English to personal goals and a lack of learner autonomy were the most salient sources of demotivation, while low perceived competence and external pressure were comparatively less prominent (Tran et al., 2026). However, such evidence concerns demotivation in general English rather than reading motivation in discipline-specific ESP settings, leaving a gap that the present study addresses. Moreover, evidence on gender differences in reading motivation is mixed, with some studies reporting higher motivation among females and others finding negligible differences (Abdullah & Yunus, 2019; Bakkaloğlu & Pilten, 2023). Therefore, this study investigates reading motivation among Economic Law majors in an "English for Economic Law" course at a Vietnamese public university, focusing on students' motivation patterns and explanations, the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and potential gender-related differences in this ESP setting.

1.1. Research Questions

- What is the level and profile of reading motivation among ESP students at a public university in Vietnam, and how do they explain their motivation?
- To what extent are ESP students intrinsically versus extrinsically motivated in English reading, and how do they experience this motivational balance?
- Are there gender-related differences in reading motivation among ESP students?

1.2. Literature Review

1.1.1. Motivation

Motivation is commonly defined as the psychological energy and direction that initiate and sustain goal-directed action. In language education, it is viewed as an internal drive that maintains learning behavior (Brown, 2000), a set of goal-oriented orientations shaping learners' choices and effort (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991), and, in the social-psychological tradition, a combination of effort, desire, and positive attitudes toward learning the target language (Gardner, 1985). In classroom contexts, motivation is evident in sustained engagement, particularly when learning is meaningful and supported through autonomy-enhancing conditions such as choice and ownership (Melendy, 2008). Extending these perspectives to reading, reading motivation refers to learners' readiness to initiate and persist in reading, reflected in their beliefs, values, goals, and affective responses that shape whether they start reading, continue despite difficulty, and engage cognitively with texts (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Schiefele et al., 2012; Wigfield et al., 2004). Because reading is effortful and often involves voluntary investment, motivation is central to reading engagement and achievement (Wigfield et al., 2004). Contemporary research conceptualizes reading motivation as multidimensional, including intrinsic components such as interest or enjoyment, involvement, and reading efficacy, alongside extrinsic components such as recognition, grades, and compliance (Schiefele et al., 2012). In L2 and EFL contexts, this multidimensionality is similarly reflected in models emphasizing

value and expectancy beliefs and in more recent measures capturing factors such as reading efficacy, enjoyment, recognition, involvement, and compliance (Wang & Gan, 2021).

1.1.2. Taxonomy of Foreign Language Learning Motivation

Foreign language learning motivation has been explained through several complementary taxonomies that clarify why learners initiate learning, persist, and shift their reasons over time. A classic distinction is between integrative and instrumental orientations: integrative motives reflect a desire to connect with the target language community, whereas instrumental motives emphasize practical benefits such as education and career advancement (Gardner & Lambert, 1959). Another widely used framework separates intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, with intrinsic motivation referring to engagement driven by interest or enjoyment and extrinsic motivation referring to engagement driven by outcomes external to the activity, such as grades or requirements (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within Self-Determination Theory, however, extrinsic motivation varies in autonomy because external regulations can be internalized and integrated so that learners gradually act from personally endorsed values rather than mere compliance; this process is supported when learning contexts satisfy needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These ideas are reflected in measurement models that differentiate multiple forms of extrinsic motivation, such as identified, introjected, and external regulation. Collectively, these perspectives highlight the multidimensional nature of language motivation, where social affiliation, practical goals, enjoyment, and varying degrees of internalization can co-exist and jointly shape learning behavior.

1.1.3. Self-Determination Theory and Conceptual Frameworks

This study draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which views motivation as varying in quality from controlled to autonomous forms of regulation and highlights the influence of social environments on learners' engagement and persistence (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020). From an SDT perspective, more autonomous and self-determined forms of motivation are encouraged when learning contexts satisfy three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In the present study, this theoretical perspective is applied to second-language reading motivation by examining students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivational orientations and exploring potential differences across gender within an ESP context. To measure reading motivation, the study adopts the Reading Motivation Questionnaire for English as a Foreign Language (RMQ-EFL) developed by Wang and Gan (2021), which comprises five dimensions—reading efficacy, reading enjoyment, recognition, involvement, and compliance—and provides a structured framework for examining students' motivational patterns in EFL reading.

At the same time, the study acknowledges that SDT's needs-based processes operate within culturally situated educational settings. In Vietnamese higher education, Confucian heritage values emphasizing respect for authority, collective harmony, diligence, and achievement through effort may shape how students experience and express motivation (Ho & Dimmock, 2023; Nguyen & Habók, 2021). As a result, compliance and recognition, although often treated in SDT as more controlled forms of extrinsic motivation, may carry socially endorsed meanings of responsibility and respect, potentially influencing learning experiences differently than in more individualistic contexts. Integrating SDT with the five-factor reading motivation framework therefore allows the study to connect factor-level motives to controlled versus autonomous regulation, while also examining gender-related similarities or differences within the same instructional environment.

1.1.4. Previous Research

Reading motivation research shows that motivation is multidimensional and closely linked to engagement and achievement. Learners' motivational dispositions relate to how much and how widely they read, which supports comprehension, and modeling studies suggest that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can predict comprehension both directly and indirectly through reading amount (Wang & Guthrie, 2004). In EFL contexts, measurement advances such as the RMQ-EFL have enabled more fine-grained analyses by capturing five factors: reading efficacy, enjoyment, recognition, involvement, and compliance (Wang & Gan, 2021).

Recent EFL evidence also indicates that motivation interacts with self-regulation and language resources. Reading motivation and self-regulated strategies, together with vocabulary knowledge, have been shown to predict reading comprehension, highlighting the combined role of affective and strategic processes (Li et al., 2022). This aligns with Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes motivation quality and argues that autonomy, competence, and relatedness support more autonomous engagement; accordingly, autonomy-supportive teaching is associated with reliable benefits for motivation and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

Gender findings are mixed and context-sensitive. Large-scale evidence often shows girls higher in reading enjoyment and performance, but the gender similarities hypothesis cautions that many differences are small and variable (Hyde, 2005). Classroom factors such as teaching quality may shape whether gaps appear, and results vary across East Asian settings. In Vietnam, studies highlight strong contextual pressures and teacher-centered expectations that may normalize compliance-oriented engagement, suggesting that motivation and any gender patterning should be interpreted through institutional and cultural conditions (Nguyen & Habók, 2021; Truong et al., 2025).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was adopted in this study to examine reading motivation among ESP students at a Vietnamese university (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In this research design, the quantitative phase was conducted first, with survey data collected and analyzed to identify general trends and patterns in students' reading motivation. The subsequent qualitative phase involved conducting interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the quantitative results. The integration of these two phases enabled the study not only to determine the extent and patterns of students' reading motivation but also to investigate the possible reasons and experiences underlying the observed quantitative findings. Thus, the design provided a comprehensive approach to answering the research questions by combining numerical evidence with students' detailed perspectives.

2.2. Participants

The study was conducted at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, where Economic Law majors take a mandatory ESP course titled English for Economic Law as a graduation prerequisite. The course develops students' capacity to read discipline-specific legal texts through authentic materials such as contracts, case studies, and legal documents. This setting reflects a Vietnamese higher-education context often characterized by exam-oriented pedagogy, large classes, and strong teacher authority (Dang & Norris, 2024). Although recent shifts have highlighted the value of ESP for workplace preparation, the course still faces challenges related to students' motivation, reading proficiency, and responsive pedagogical approaches.

The study included two participant groups. In Phase 1, 416 non-English-major Economic Law students enrolled in English for Economic Law completed the questionnaire (93 males, 22.4%; 323 females, 77.6%). Most had studied English for approximately 10 years and completed three years of General English at university; their proficiency was assumed to be around CEFR B2 (Council of Europe, 2001). Participants were predominantly second-year students and ranged in age from 18 to 22 years ($M = 19.6$, $SD = 0.8$). Data were collected during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year (February–March 2025).

In Phase 2, 20 students were purposively selected from the survey sample for semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling enables selection of information-rich cases (Palinkas et al., 2015) and suits explanatory sequential mixed-methods designs where quantitative results guide follow-up selection. Interviewees were chosen to maximize variation in gender, academic performance, and questionnaire profiles to capture diverse perspectives on reading motivation. The decision to interview 20 students was guided by the principle of data saturation—the point at which additional interviews yield no substantially new themes—which methodological research indicates is typically reached within 12 to 20 interviews for relatively homogeneous samples (Guest et al., 2006). This number was also consistent with the explanatory

sequential design, whose aim is to explain and elaborate the survey findings rather than to achieve statistical generalization; coding of the final interviews confirmed that no substantially new themes were emerging.

2.3. Research Instruments

The questionnaire was adapted from the Reading Motivation Questionnaire for English as a Foreign Language (RMQ-EFL) developed by Wang and Gan (2021), selected for its EFL-specific design and grounding in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

The adapted questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part A collected demographic information (gender, age, year of study, and prior English learning experience). Part B comprised 25 items measuring five dimensions: Reading Efficacy (7 items), Reading Enjoyment (7 items), Recognition (4 items), Involvement (4 items), and Compliance (3 items). These represent both intrinsic motivation (Reading Efficacy, Reading Enjoyment, Involvement) and extrinsic motivation (Recognition, Compliance) (see Table 1). On average, participants needed approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete the 25 RMQ-EFL items, and about 15 minutes for the full questionnaire including Part A. The instrument contained one negatively worded item (Item 3, "English reading is my weak part of this subject"), which was reverse-scored before analysis so that, across all items, higher values consistently represented stronger reading motivation. Because responses were recorded on a five-point scale, possible scores ranged from 1 to 5 for each item and from 25 to 125 for the full instrument, with higher totals indicating greater reading motivation.

Table 1. Items Clustered in the Questionnaire

Clusters	Sub-clusters	Items
Intrinsic	Factor 1: Reading Efficacy	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
	Factor 2: Reading Enjoyment	8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14
	Factor 4: Involvement	19, 20, 21, 22
Extrinsic	Factor 3: Recognition	15, 16, 17, 18
	Factor 5: Compliance	23, 24, 25

All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The questionnaire was developed in English before being translated into Vietnamese using a translation–back-translation procedure to reduce language barriers and ensure semantic equivalence: two bilingual experts independently translated the instrument into Vietnamese, resolved discrepancies through discussion, and a third bilingual expert back-translated it into English for verification. Reliability was examined via Cronbach's alpha in both the pilot (N = 20) and main study (N = 416).

The semi-structured interview protocol comprised open-ended questions about students' English reading experiences, motivational influences, challenges, and strategies when engaging with legal texts. Sample questions included: "What motivates you to read English texts in your English for Economic Law course?"; "Can you describe a time when an English reading task felt enjoyable or interesting, and what made it so?"; "What difficulties do you face when reading specialized legal texts in English?"; and "To what extent do grades, teacher expectations, or graduation requirements shape how you approach English reading?" Interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, lasted 30–45 minutes, and were audio-recorded with consent. The questionnaire was administered online through Google Forms, whereas all interviews were conducted face-to-face in a private room on campus. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was employed for transcript verification, and two researchers independently coded the data before reaching consensus through discussion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Inter-coder agreement between the two coders was high (Cohen's κ = .87), indicating strong agreement (McHugh, 2012); the few remaining discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

2.4. Procedures

Data collection followed two sequential phases. Ethical approval was obtained in advance, and all participants provided informed consent.

In Phase 1, a pilot survey (N = 20) checked item clarity and reliability; internal consistency was excellent (Extrinsic Motivation α = .966; Intrinsic Motivation α = .958) (George & Mallery, 2003). The revised Google Forms survey was then administered to 430 students over one week; 14 responses were excluded for incompleteness or response bias, yielding 416 valid cases (96.7%).

In Phase 2, a pilot interview with three students refined the interview guide (Kallio et al., 2016), after which semi-structured interviews were completed with 20 participants in private settings and audio-recorded. Interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed in Vietnamese, with only selected excerpts translated into English for reporting.

2.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (Version 27) in several stages. First, the dataset was screened for missing values, outliers, and assumption violations; 14 cases showing substantial missing data or response bias were excluded. Second, Cronbach's alpha was computed to confirm internal consistency. Reliability was excellent for both subscales: Extrinsic Motivation (α = .948) and Intrinsic Motivation (α = .907), meeting the α > .90 criterion (George & Mallery, 2003). Third, descriptive statistics were generated, including frequencies and percentages for demographic variables and means and standard deviations for questionnaire items and motivational factors. Finally, Moidunny's (2009) framework for five-point Likert scales was applied to interpret mean scores (see Table 2).

Table 2. Mean Score Interpretation (Moidunny, 2009)

Mean Score	Interpretation
1.00 – 1.80	Very Low
1.81 – 2.60	Low
2.61 – 3.20	Medium
3.21 – 4.20	High
4.21 – 5.00	Very High

To address the research questions, several inferential statistical tests were conducted. A paired-samples *t*-test was used to compare mean scores of intrinsic motivation versus extrinsic motivation, addressing RQ2. An independent samples *t*-test was employed to examine gender differences in both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, addressing RQ3. For all inferential tests, the significance level was set at α = .05. Effect sizes were also calculated to assess the practical significance of any statistically significant findings. Effect sizes were estimated using Cohen's *d* and interpreted following Cohen's (1988) benchmarks, with values of 0.20, 0.50, and 0.80 representing small, medium, and large effects, respectively.

Qualitative interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns in students' reading motivation. Following the six-phase procedure, the researchers first familiarized themselves with the dataset through repeated listening and reading, then generated initial codes across transcripts, collated related codes into candidate themes, and iteratively reviewed and refined these themes for coherence, distinctiveness, and evidential support before defining and naming the final themes and integrating them with the quantitative results through illustrative quotations. To strengthen analytic reliability and trustworthiness, two researchers independently coded the data and developed preliminary themes, then met to compare interpretations, resolve disagreements, and agree on a consolidated thematic structure. This collaborative process enhanced credibility and dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and helped explain how students experienced and made sense of the motivational profiles observed in the survey within the Vietnamese ESP context.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Comparison of the Five Factors

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for all five reading motivation factors among the 416 Economic Law students. The results reveal varying levels of motivation across the five dimensions, with mean scores ranging from 2.96 to 3.56. Compliance demonstrated the highest mean score (M = 3.56),

followed by Recognition (M = 3.42), Involvement (M = 3.32), Reading Enjoyment (M = 3.19), and Reading Efficacy (M = 2.96). These findings suggest that students are primarily motivated by external expectations and academic requirements, while their confidence in reading abilities appears to be the weakest motivational factor.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

Sub-clusters	N	Mean
Factor 1: Reading efficacy	416	2.96
Factor 2: Reading enjoyment	416	3.19
Factor 3: Recognition	416	3.42
Factor 4: Involvement	416	3.32
Factor 5: Compliance	416	3.56
Valid N (listwise)	416	

3.1.1. Reading Efficacy

Reading Efficacy, reflecting students' confidence and perceived competence in English reading, recorded the lowest mean among the five factors (M = 2.96). Based on Moidunny's (2009) interpretation, this score falls within the medium range (2.61–3.20), indicating only moderate confidence overall. As shown in Table 4, Item 3 received the highest mean (M = 3.32, SD = 1.101), whereas Item 7 had the lowest (M = 2.78, SD = 1.108). In addition, relatively low means for Item 1 (M = 2.83, SD = .934) and Item 6 (M = 2.87, SD = .936) suggest that perceived reading ability and vocabulary-related confidence remain key constraints on students' ESP reading engagement.

Table 4. Reading Efficacy Items (Factor 1 Mean Score = 2.96)

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. I am good at reading in English.	2.83	.934
2. It is easy for me to get the meaning of the sentences.	2.95	.914
3. English reading is my weak part of this subject.	3.32	1.101
4. It is easy for me to analyze the English text structure.	2.89	.983
5. I usually can get the main theme of the English text when I read.	3.12	.963
6. I usually know most of the word meanings when I read English text.	2.87	.936
7. My friends sometimes tell me I am a good English reader.	2.78	1.108

Qualitative data corroborate these quantitative findings. Two primary themes emerged: vocabulary limitations and lack of confidence in comprehension.

Regarding vocabulary challenges, Student 7 explained, "When I read legal texts in English, there are so many specialized terms I don't understand. Even though I studied English for many years, legal vocabulary is completely different." Student 14 noted, "I can understand simple texts, but with economic law documents, I feel lost because of technical words." These comments align with the low mean score for vocabulary knowledge (M = 2.87).

The second theme was articulated by Student 3: "I always need to read sentences multiple times to understand the meaning. I'm not confident that I'm getting the correct interpretation, especially with complex sentence structures." Student 19 added, "Even when I think I understand, I'm not sure if I really grasped the main idea." This hesitancy is reflected in the low score for "I am good at reading in English" (M = 2.83) and explains why students perceive reading as their weak point in English learning.

3.1.2. Reading Enjoyment

Reading Enjoyment, which reflects intrinsic interest and pleasure in reading English, showed a mean score of 3.19 and was categorized as medium based on Moidunny's (2009) scale. Item-level results indicate that enjoyment is strongly shaped by interest and classroom stimulation. Item 14 received the highest mean (M = 3.38, SD = .923), suggesting that teacher-triggered curiosity can encourage additional reading beyond requirements. Similarly, Item 10 (M = 3.33, SD = .996) and Item 9 (M = 3.29, SD = 1.005) indicate greater persistence and enjoyment when reading topics align with students' interests. In contrast, Item 8 recorded

the lowest mean (M = 2.89, SD = 1.053), implying that enjoyment was less associated with reading English for global news than with personally relevant or teacher-highlighted content.

Table 5. Reading Enjoyment Items (Factor 2 Mean Score = 3.19)

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
8. I enjoy reading in English to learn what is going on in the United States and in the world.	2.89	1.053
9. I like reading in English to learn something new about people and things that interest me.	3.29	1.005
10. If a book is interesting, I don't care how hard it is to read.	3.33	.996
11. I like to read in English because I always feel happy when I read things that are of interest to me.	3.28	.918
12. When the topic is interesting, I am willing to read difficult English texts.	3.24	.985
13. I enjoy the challenge of difficult English passages.	2.99	.977
14. If the teacher discusses something interesting, I might read more about it.	3.38	.923

Interview data revealed three themes explaining students' reading enjoyment: topic-dependent interest, practical relevance, and challenge versus engagement.

Regarding topic-dependent interest, Student 5 stated, "I only enjoy reading when the topic relates to something I care about. If it's about economics or business law, I'm more interested." This supports the lower score for reading about global affairs (M = 2.89).

The practical relevance theme emerged strongly. Student 11 explained, "When I see that reading materials connect to my future career as a legal professional, I feel more motivated." Student 16 echoed, "I enjoy reading about things that can help me in my job someday. Abstract texts are boring." This correlates with the high score for teacher-facilitated interest (M = 3.38).

Several students discussed the balance between challenge and engagement. Student 8 noted, "When a text is interesting, I don't mind if it's difficult. I'm willing to use a dictionary and spend time understanding it. But if the topic is dull, even easy texts feel like a burden." This aligns with the relatively high score for "If a book is interesting, I don't care how hard it is to read" (M = 3.33), demonstrating that intrinsic interest can override difficulty barriers.

3.1.3. Recognition

Recognition, reflecting students' desire for acknowledgment and praise for their English reading, recorded a mean score of 3.42, which falls in the high range (3.21–4.20) based on Moidunny's (2009) interpretation. It was the second-highest factor among the five dimensions, indicating that evaluative affirmation is a salient driver of reading engagement in this ESP context. As shown in Table 6, Item 17 received the highest mean (M = 3.60, SD = .947), followed by Item 15 (M = 3.52, SD = 1.006) and Item 16 (M = 3.50, SD = .979). In contrast, Item 18 recorded a noticeably lower mean (M = 3.07, SD = .998), suggesting that recognition from teachers and peers may be more influential than parental praise in shaping students' motivation to read in English.

Table 6. Recognition Items (Factor 3 Mean Score = 3.42)

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
15. I like my teacher to say that I read well in English.	3.52	1.006
16. I like to get compliments for my reading.	3.50	.979
17. I am happy when someone recognizes my reading in English.	3.60	.947
18. My parents often tell me what a good job I am doing in English reading.	3.07	.998

Qualitative analysis identified two main themes: validation from teachers and social comparison.

Concerning teacher validation, Student 2 shared, "When my teacher praises my reading in front of the class, it makes me feel proud and motivates me to read more carefully." Student 12 added, "Teacher recognition is very important because it shows that my effort is noticed. In Vietnamese culture, we value teacher approval highly."

The social comparison theme was evident in several responses. Student 9 explained, "I feel motivated when others recognize my reading ability because it means I'm performing better than some classmates." Student 18 noted, "Being recognized for reading well boosts my confidence. It makes me feel that I'm not behind others in English skills."

Regarding the lower score for parental recognition (M = 3.07), Student 15 provided insight: "My parents don't really understand English, so they can't judge my reading skills. They just encourage me generally to study hard, but specific recognition for reading doesn't happen." This contextualizes why parental acknowledgment is less influential in this academic setting.

3.1.4. Involvement

Involvement, which captures students' cognitive and emotional engagement with English reading, achieved a mean score of 3.32 and was classified as high (3.21–4.20) based on Moidunny's (2009) interpretation. As shown in Table 7, Item 19 recorded the highest mean (M = 3.55, SD = .948), indicating that many students associate English reading with a sense of enjoyment. The remaining items clustered closely, including Item 21 (M = 3.27, SD = .945), Item 20 (M = 3.25, SD = .985), and Item 22 (M = 3.24, SD = .964), suggesting relatively consistent levels of engagement across imagery, immersion, and attitudes toward reading classes. Overall, these results indicate that students experience moderate to high involvement during English reading activities.

Table 7. Involvement Items (Factor 4 Mean Score = 3.32)

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
19. It is fun to read in English.	3.55	.948
20. I make pictures in my mind when I read in English.	3.25	.985
21. I tend to get deeply engaged when I read in English.	3.27	.945
22. I like English reading classes.	3.24	.964

Interview responses revealed two key themes: cognitive engagement strategies and emotional connection to content.

Student 4 described their cognitive engagement: "When I read about legal cases in English, I try to visualize the situation—the courtroom, the people involved. This helps me understand and remember better." Student 13 similarly shared, "I relate the text to things I already know. If I'm reading about contract law, I think about contracts I've seen in real life."

The emotional connection theme emerged through several responses. Student 6 stated, "I find reading in English fun when the material tells a story or presents real scenarios." Student 17 added, "I get deeply engaged when reading about topics I'm passionate about, like international trade law. My emotions get involved, and I forget about the language difficulty." These insights explain why "It is fun to read in English" received the highest score (M = 3.55) within this factor.

Student 10 provided a nuanced perspective: "I like English reading classes because they provide structure. When I read alone, I sometimes lose focus, but in class, the teacher's guidance helps me stay engaged." This comment illuminates the supportive role of classroom context in maintaining student involvement.

3.1.5. Compliance

Compliance, reflecting students' adherence to external expectations and course requirements, recorded the highest mean among the five factors (M = 3.56) and was classified as high (3.21–4.20) based on Moidunny's (2009) interpretation. As shown in Table 8, Item 25 received the highest mean (M = 3.68, SD = .892), followed by Item 24 (M = 3.53, SD = .915) and Item 23 (M = 3.48, SD = .886). The consistently high item means indicate a strong compliance-oriented motivational pattern, suggesting that students' reading engagement is closely tied to meeting deadlines and fulfilling teacher- and course-related expectations.

Table 8. Compliance Items (Factor 5 Mean Score = 3.56)

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
23. I always do my reading work exactly as the teacher wants it.	3.48	.886
24. Finishing every reading assignment is very important to me.	3.53	.915
25. I always try to finish my reading on time.	3.68	.892

Qualitative data identified three prominent themes: academic obligation, cultural values of diligence, and grade-driven motivation.

Student 1 articulated the academic obligation theme: "English for Economic Law is a prerequisite course. I must complete all reading assignments because it's required for graduation." Student 20 echoed, "*I read because it's assigned. Whether I enjoy it or not is secondary*."

Cultural values emerged as an important influence. Student 8 explained, "In Vietnamese education culture, we are taught to respect teachers and follow their instructions carefully." Student 11 added, "Discipline and hard work are valued in our society. I feel obligated to do my reading work exactly as required." These perspectives illuminate why "I always do my reading work exactly as the teacher wants it" scored relatively high (M = 3.48).

Grade-driven motivation was explicitly mentioned by several participants. Student 13 stated, "I need good grades to maintain my scholarship and have better career opportunities." Student 16 concurred, "Finishing assignments is important because our reading comprehension is assessed. I can't afford to miss any work if I want to pass." This pragmatic orientation explains the highest item score for timely completion (M = 3.68).

3.2. The Five Factors in Terms of Extrinsic and Intrinsic Reading Motivation

To answer the second research question, which examined whether students were more strongly motivated by intrinsic or extrinsic factors, the five motivational factors were first classified into intrinsic and extrinsic categories based on the RMQ-EFL framework proposed by Wang and Gan (2021), which draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985).

As shown in Tables 9 and 10, the participants reported a higher level of extrinsic motivation than intrinsic motivation. The mean score for extrinsic motivation was 3.49 (SD = .756), compared with 3.16 (SD = .720) for intrinsic motivation. A paired-samples *t*-test indicated that this difference was statistically significant, $t(415) = 13.509$, $p < .001$. The mean difference between the two forms of motivation was .329, with a 95% confidence interval of [.281, .376]. Since zero was not included within the confidence interval, the results indicate a statistically reliable difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. The effect size was moderate (Cohen's $d = 0.66$), suggesting that the difference also had practical importance. Taken together, these findings suggest that extrinsic motivation was more prominent than intrinsic motivation among the students in this study.

Table 9. Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1 Extrinsic	3.4928	416	.75615	.03707
Pair 1 Intrinsic	3.1642	416	.72013	.03531

Table 10. Paired Samples Test

	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Error	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig.
Pair 1	.32858	.49611	.02432	.28077	.37640	13.509	415	.000

Quantitative results demonstrate that Economic Law students at this Vietnamese university are predominantly driven by extrinsic factors: recognition, compliance with requirements, and academic expectations, rather than intrinsic ones, in reading English texts.

Qualitative data deepen this understanding. Student 5 responded, "If this course weren't mandatory, I probably wouldn't read English texts about law. I do it because I have to." Student 14 similarly noted, "My main motivation is to get a good grade and graduate."

Some students acknowledged the interplay between both motivation types. Student 9 explained, "I started reading because it's required, but sometimes I find topics interesting. The extrinsic requirement gets me to start, then occasionally intrinsic motivation kicks in." Student 19 added, "External pressure keeps me consistent. Without deadlines and grades, I might only read topics I naturally enjoy, which wouldn't be enough for the course."

A few participants recognized limitations of purely extrinsic motivation. Student 3 reflected, "I wish I enjoyed reading in English more naturally. Doing it only for grades feels tiring and doesn't help me remember information long-term." These insights contextualize the quantitative finding of higher extrinsic motivation, revealing both pragmatic acceptance of external pressures and some students' desire for more intrinsically motivated engagement.

3.3. Gender-Related Differences in Reading Motivation in English Learning

The third research question examined whether there were significant differences in motivational patterns between male and female students. The sample consisted of 93 male students and 323 female students.

For intrinsic motivation, male students demonstrated a slightly higher mean (M = 3.26, SD = .838) compared to female students (M = 3.14, SD = .681). However, the independent-samples *t*-test revealed this difference was not statistically significant, $t(414) = 1.530$, $p = .127$.

Similarly, for extrinsic motivation, female students showed a marginally higher mean (M = 3.50, SD = .729) compared to male students (M = 3.47, SD = .849). This difference was also not statistically significant, $t(414) = -.317$, $p = .752$. Both comparisons yielded negligible effect sizes (intrinsic motivation, Cohen's $d = 0.18$; extrinsic motivation, Cohen's $d = 0.04$), confirming that the small mean differences were of no practical importance.

Table 11. Group Statistics

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Intrinsic	Male	93	3.2647	.83805
Intrinsic	Female	323	3.1353	.68113
Extrinsic	Male	93	3.4709	.84874
Extrinsic	Female	323	3.4991	.72863

Table 12. Independent Samples Test

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.
Intrinsic (Equal variances assumed)	1.530	414	.127	.12946	.08461
Extrinsic (Equal variances assumed)	-.317	414	.752	-.02822	.08908

Statistical analyses revealed no significant gender differences in either intrinsic or extrinsic reading motivation among Economic Law students. Both male and female students exhibited similar motivational patterns, with extrinsic factors dominating regardless of gender.

Qualitative data supported these findings. Most interviewees indicated that academic pressures and course requirements affect students similarly across genders. As Student 7 (female) noted, "I don't think gender matters much in our motivation to read in English. We're all in the same program with the same requirements." A male participant, Student 4, offered a similar view: "Whether you are male or female, the pressure to pass the course and graduate is the same, and that is what pushes everyone to read." Student 12 (male) likewise remarked, "I don't see boys reading more or less than girls; it depends on the person, not the gender."

A few students offered nuanced observations about subtle differences not captured quantitatively, such as female students being slightly more willing to seek help or appearing more organized, but emphasized these varied more by individual than by gender. Overall, both quantitative and qualitative evidence indicate that gender is not a significant differentiating factor in reading motivation among these students. The shared academic context and institutional requirements appear to create a relatively uniform motivational landscape regardless of gender.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. The Five Factors of Reading Motivation

The first research question examined ESP students' reading motivation across the five RMQ-EFL factors. The mean hierarchy (Compliance highest, followed by Recognition, Involvement, Reading Enjoyment, and Reading Efficacy) indicates a profile in which extrinsic motives dominate, while intrinsic dimensions are present but secondary. This pattern is consistent with findings from other university EFL contexts using the same framework (Li et al., 2022).

Compliance emerged as the strongest factor, suggesting that reading is largely driven by course requirements and external expectations, aligning with SDT's notion of controlled regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This is plausible in Vietnam, where teacher-centered norms and achievement-oriented practices can legitimize compliance-focused engagement (Ho & Dimmock, 2023; Nguyen & Habók, 2021). Recognition ranked second, indicating that teacher feedback and evaluative affirmation matter; however, SDT suggests such extrinsic motives are most beneficial when internalized rather than remaining dependent on external approval (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Among intrinsic dimensions, Involvement was higher than Enjoyment and Efficacy, implying students can become engaged with texts under supportive classroom conditions that foster competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Reading Enjoyment was moderate, which in an ESP context may reflect relevance and utility rather than leisure interest. Finally, Reading Efficacy was the lowest, suggesting limited confidence in English reading ability. This finding is consistent with Shen (2013), who found that vocabulary was a primary challenge for EFL learners when reading academic content, with difficulties also related to limited linguistic proficiency and comprehension of content matter. However, efficacy is responsive to instruction, so scaffolding and guided practice may strengthen confidence and support more sustained engagement.

4.2. Extrinsic Motivation Versus Intrinsic Reading Motivation

The second research question examined whether ESP students were more intrinsically or extrinsically motivated in English reading. Overall, the results indicated that extrinsic motivation was more salient than intrinsic motivation, suggesting that students' reading was driven primarily by external demands rather than personal interest. This pattern is consistent with SDT, which explains that controlled motivation tends to dominate when tasks are experienced as necessary for meeting requirements or avoiding negative consequences (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Similar tendencies have been reported in other Asian EFL contexts, including Chinese university learners assessed with RMQ-EFL (Li et al., 2022). In Vietnam, this profile is plausible because English learning is often framed instrumentally in relation to academic progression and employability, and local research frequently documents strong instrumental orientations (Le & Hoang, 2023). At the same time, intrinsic engagement was still evident, particularly when students perceived ESP texts as meaningful and relevant to future professional needs. From an SDT perspective, this points to the possibility of internalization, where externally prompted reading becomes more self-endorsed when learners experience value, competence, and supportive relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Pedagogically, this suggests designing ESP reading instruction to support autonomy, competence, and relatedness through meaningful choices, strategy scaffolding, and collaborative tasks.

A closer reading of both data strands helps explain why these ESP students appeared more strongly driven by external factors than by personal interest or enjoyment. First, the learning environment is shaped by Confucian-heritage educational values that frame diligence, obedience, and the fulfilment of academic duty as markers of a good student, so reading "because it is required" is experienced not as coercion but as

socially endorsed responsibility (Ho & Dimmock, 2023; Nguyen & Habók, 2021). Second, the course is assessed and gate-kept through examinations and a graduation requirement, and such high-stakes, teacher-centred conditions tend to generate washback that channels effort toward compliance and grades rather than exploratory reading (Dang & Norris, 2024). Third, for non-English majors, English is typically framed instrumentally, as a tool for academic progression and employability rather than a source of leisure, which foregrounds extrinsic, future-oriented motives (Le & Hoang, 2023; Tran et al., 2026). Finally, from an SDT standpoint, intrinsic motivation depends on the satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness; where texts are difficult, choice is limited, and efficacy is low, the very conditions that would nurture interest are weakened, leaving controlled forms of motivation dominant (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Reeve & Cheon, 2021).

4.3. Gender-Related Differences

The third research question examined gender differences in reading motivation. Overall, the results indicated no meaningful differences between male and female students in either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, suggesting that gender did not differentiate how students approached English reading in this ESP context. This finding is consistent with RMQ-EFL validation research reporting no gender differences when reading motivation is measured through the same five-factor model (Wang & Gan, 2021) and aligns with the gender similarities hypothesis, which argues that males and females are often more similar than different across many psychological variables (Hyde, 2005).

Several contextual factors may account for this pattern. The course's mandatory status likely imposed shared academic pressures and evaluation demands that encouraged similar controlled motivation across the cohort (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In addition, ESP legal reading is typically instrumental and performance-linked, which may compress preference-based variation and focus motivation on common academic and professional goals (Ryan & Deci, 2020). In Vietnamese university EFL contexts, pragmatic and future-oriented motives are frequently reported among non-English majors, and these drivers may operate similarly across genders (Le & Hoang, 2023).

The absence of statistically significant gender differences in both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation warrants closer interpretation rather than being dismissed as a null result. One explanation is structural: because the course is compulsory and uniformly assessed, male and female students face the same requirements, materials, and evaluation pressures, which may compress gender-based variation and produce a shared, compliance-oriented motivational profile (Ryan & Deci, 2020). This interpretation aligns with the gender similarities hypothesis, which holds that males and females are statistically similar on most psychological variables, with differences that are typically small and context-dependent (Hyde, 2005), and it converges with RMQ-EFL validation evidence reporting comparable reading motivation across genders (Wang & Gan, 2021). At the same time, the mixed findings in the wider literature—some studies reporting higher motivation among female readers and others finding negligible differences (Abdullah & Yunus, 2019; Bakkaloğlu & Pilten, 2023)—suggest that any gender patterning is sensitive to educational level, instructional context, and reading domain, and that a strongly instrumental ESP setting such as legal English may attenuate the enjoyment-related advantages sometimes observed among female learners in general reading.

5. CONCLUSION

This study shows that ESP students' reading motivation in Vietnamese higher education reflects an interaction among institutional requirements, culturally situated classroom norms, and learners' individual experiences. The dominance of extrinsic motivation, especially compliance and recognition, indicates that external pressures strongly shape engagement. However, moderate intrinsic motivation, particularly when materials are perceived as relevant, suggests that more self-determined engagement is possible when students find personal meaning in ESP reading. A key concern is the low level of reading efficacy, signaling the need for stronger support in vocabulary growth, comprehension strategies, and confidence-building.

The absence of gender differences highlights the primacy of context, as students navigate similar institutional demands regardless of gender. While compliance can secure participation, longer-term

outcomes depend on supporting internalization, autonomy, and self-efficacy through meaningful choice and competence support. The study provides a basis for culturally responsive ESP instruction and points to priorities for future research, including intervention studies and cross-disciplinary comparisons.

5.1. Practical Implications

These findings carry several practical implications. For educators, the low reading efficacy and the dominance of compliance suggest that instruction should build on students' existing sense of responsibility while cultivating more autonomous motivation—for example, by embedding explicit vocabulary and comprehension-strategy instruction, offering scaffolded and authentic legal texts, and giving students meaningful choices and opportunities to link reading to their professional goals. For curriculum developers, the salience of career relevance implies that reading materials should be built around discipline-specific, real-world tasks (e.g., contracts, cases, and workplace documents) that students perceive as personally and professionally useful, with graded difficulty and integrated support. For higher education institutions, fostering autonomy-supportive learning environments—through teacher professional development, manageable class sizes, and assessment that rewards engagement rather than mere completion—can help internalize motivation and support autonomous reading behaviors. The results may also inform policymakers concerned with improving English language learning outcomes, pointing to the value of ESP curricula and assessment frameworks that balance accountability with the development of intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy. Finally, for researchers, the study provides a basis for designing and evaluating interventions aimed at increasing students' reading engagement, self-efficacy, and internalized motivation in ESP contexts.

5.2. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted with Economic Law students at a single public university, and the sample—though sizeable—may not be representative of ESP learners in other disciplines, institutions, or regions, which constrains the generalizability of the findings to other ESP populations. Second, the study relied on self-reported measures of motivation, which are susceptible to social desirability and recall biases and may not fully correspond to students' actual reading behavior. Third, the specific institutional context—a compulsory, examination-linked course within a Confucian-heritage educational culture—likely shaped the motivational profiles observed, so the patterns reported here should be read in light of that context rather than assumed to hold universally. Finally, the cross-sectional design captured motivation at a single time point and cannot speak to how motivation develops or changes across a course or programme.

5.3. Recommendations for Future Research

Building on these limitations, future research could pursue several specific directions. Comparative and multi-institutional studies across different ESP disciplines (e.g., business, engineering, medicine) and university types would clarify how far the present patterns generalize. Longitudinal and intervention designs could test whether autonomy-supportive teaching, strategy instruction, and career-relevant materials strengthen intrinsic motivation and reading efficacy over time. Mixed-methods studies that incorporate behavioral or performance data (e.g., reading logs, comprehension assessments, or eye-tracking) alongside self-reports would reduce reliance on a single method and test the motivation–achievement link more directly. Further work could also examine how the specific Self-Determination Theory needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be operationalized in ESP reading instruction, and could investigate gender and other individual differences using context-sensitive measures to explain when and why such differences emerge or disappear.

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does not have an Institutional Review Board or Research Ethics Committee; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and participant anonymity and confidentiality were maintained.

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