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# From Reading Interest to Autonomy: How Library Environments Support Self-Directed Learning

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**Abstract.** Students' interest and enjoyment of reading is not always directly associated with self-directed learning. This study explores the relationship between students' interest in reading, their habits of visiting the school library, and the development of self-directed learning skills. A survey was conducted among 292 students from 5th to 9th grade at one Secondary school of Liepaja (Latvia) in September 2024. The questionnaire included statements rated on a five-point Likert scale and questions about reading and library use. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Spearman's rank correlation. The findings indicate a statistically significant moderate correlation ( $r_s = .325, p < .001$ ) between reading enjoyment and library visits. Students who enjoy reading tend to use the library more actively, reflecting greater autonomy and initiative in managing their learning process. These results highlight the potential of promoting reading interest and library engagement as effective strategies for fostering self-directed learning skills among students.

**Keywords:** library visits, reading habits, reading interest, school library, self-directed learning, student autonomy

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## Introduction

In today's society, where digital technologies increasingly replace traditional sources of information, students' interest in reading books has become a growing concern. Although reading remains a fundamental skill that fosters cognitive development, language acquisition, and imagination, many students opt for alternative forms of entertainment such as social media or video games.

Reading offers numerous benefits: it enhances language proficiency, expands vocabulary, improves concentration, and cultivates empathy by allowing readers to engage with diverse characters and experiences. Furthermore, reading supports the development of critical thinking and a deeper understanding of the world—skills that are essential not only in academic contexts but also in everyday life and future professional endeavors (Salokhiddinova & Dilorom, 2024; Sun, Sahakian, Langley et al., 2024).

Reading is a fundamental skill that supports self-directed learning. Students who enjoy reading are generally more motivated to learn independently; can sustain concentration for longer periods, search for information effectively, and comprehend texts without external assistance. Reading, whether it takes place for learning purposes or for personal enjoyment, is largely a self-directed process in which the student independently reads, understands, analyzes, and critically evaluates the text, formulates their own opinion about it, and becomes aware of

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their personal learning goals related to the reading and its significance in future life (Laškova & Ročāne, 2024).

The aim of the study is to explore the relationship between students' interest in reading, their habits of visiting the school library, and the development of self-directed learning skills. It also aims to present empirical findings on how students' interest in reading influences their library usage habits and how these behaviors relate to self-directed learning. The study employs a mixed-method approach, including a review of theoretical literature to establish the conceptual framework, and empirical methods such as student surveys and quantitative data analysis. Data were processed using statistical techniques and visualized through graphical representations to identify patterns and correlations.

However, the decline in reading habits among students raises concerns about their ability to develop these essential competencies. Research suggests that regular engagement with books not only improves academic performance but also nurtures creativity and emotional intelligence (Mihret & Joshi, 2025). Unlike passive consumption of digital content, reading requires active cognitive involvement, which strengthens memory and analytical skills. Moreover, school libraries play a crucial role in creating an environment that encourages reading by providing access to diverse resources and fostering collaborative learning experiences. Promoting reading culture in schools is therefore not just an educational priority but a strategic investment in lifelong learning and personal growth.

Reading practices are a key factor in developing academic competence and enhancing cognitive processes. Regular interaction with written texts improves reading skills, critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and learning motivation (Sultana, 2025).

### **Exploring the Relationship Between Reading Interest and Habit Formation**

An analysis of data from international studies—PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) and PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment)—on the reading skills of 4th-grade and 15-year-old students in Latvia reveals a clear trend: children who enjoy reading and spend at least 30 minutes daily reading books outside of school typically achieve higher levels of text comprehension compared to peers with lower interest in reading (Kampmane, Geske, & Ozola, 2025). Researchers further emphasize the importance of introducing children to texts from an early age and fostering consistent reading habits. Beyond frequency, promoting critical reading is essential—encouraging students not only to read but to interpret, analyze, and understand what they read. This competency extends beyond traditional texts to include the ability to process and evaluate recurring audio and visual information in today's media-rich environment (Gündoğmuş, 2024). Thus, regular and enjoyable reading habits significantly enhance students' comprehension abilities, especially when paired with critical and reflective reading practices.

To foster reading habits, it is essential to create an environment where reading is perceived as a voluntary and enjoyable activity rather than an obligation (Pieper, 2017). Such an environment should be both supportive and inspiring, encouraging students to explore texts freely (Gündoğmuş, 2024). Providing a supportive social and physical environment, increasing access to quality reading materials, and integrating consistent reading routines into daily life strongly correlate with better academic achievement and lifelong learning competencies (Sultana, 2025) as reading habits and study skills are important predictors that directly correlate with academic results and moderately forecast student performance (Abid, Aslam, Alghamdi, & Kumar, 2023).

Reading habits reflect the regularity and intensity of readers' behavior, while study skills indicate the ability to effectively acquire and integrate new information. Both factors—

reading habits and study skills—significantly influence students' academic performance (Abid, Aslam, Alghamdi, & Kumar, 2023). Within the school setting, the library plays a central role by offering students the opportunity to visit at their own discretion and engage with diverse resources. The school library is not merely a repository of books; it is an integral component of the learning process. Its mission extends beyond providing access to literature: it supports students' academic growth, promotes research and creativity, and cultivates critical thinking. Furthermore, it creates conditions for interdisciplinary learning, enabling collaboration across subjects and enriching school projects (Radolović, 2020). Thus, a school library becomes a cornerstone of holistic education, promoting independent learning, intellectual curiosity, and interdisciplinary collaboration, thereby enhancing the overall quality of the learning process.

Self-directed learning depends on both individual learner characteristics and the surrounding learning environment. In this approach, students take responsibility for setting their own learning goals and tasks. In traditional classroom settings, learning is often shaped by assessments and teacher requirements, creating a controlled environment that can limit student autonomy and reduce motivation and ownership of learning outcomes. By contrast, self-directed learning allows students to decide not only what they learn, but also where and how they learn, granting them greater control over the learning process and fostering independence. This freedom to manage one's own learning positions students as active agents in initiating and directing educational activities, making self-directed learning a broader concept closely tied to learner autonomy (Loyens, Magda, & Rikers, 2008). The school library functions as a self-directed learning environment that fosters students' autonomy and the development of higher-level executive skills (Doud, 2025).

Public libraries play a crucial role in fostering self-directed lifelong learning by providing spaces for collaborative study groups and informal education. The research highlights that such environments empower individuals to take ownership of their learning, enhancing autonomy and social engagement. Study groups in libraries not only support knowledge acquisition but also strengthen community ties and promote active citizenship. Overall, the findings suggest that libraries should continue to develop inclusive, resource-rich settings that encourage self-directed learning as a cornerstone of lifelong education (Yoshida, 2024).

Visiting the library to read, select books for home reading, or study exemplifies this autonomy, as such choices reflect the principles of self-directed learning. To strengthen these habits, educators should encourage reading beyond classroom hours, provide diverse and engaging materials, connect reading tasks to real-life contexts, and create an environment where reading is voluntary and enjoyable (Aprilia, Lustyantje, & Rafli, 2020). To foster reading habits, it is essential to create an environment where reading is a voluntary and self-motivated activity rather than a forced obligation. Such an environment is supported by the availability of a diverse and accessible book collection. Analysis of empirical data further reveals that respondents who have experienced a desire to read but lacked access to books are more likely to express enthusiasm for reading than those who have not encountered such a situation (Laškova & Ročane, 2023).

Reading not only enhances academic achievement but also serves as a foundation for lifelong learning and intellectual growth. Studies highlight that engagement with diverse texts fosters curiosity, adaptability, and critical thinking—skills essential in a rapidly changing knowledge society (Salokhiddinova & Dilorom, 2024). When students perceive reading as a tool for personal enrichment rather than a compulsory task, they are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation, which sustains learning beyond formal education. This perspective aligns with global educational priorities that emphasize the cultivation of autonomous learners capable of navigating complex information landscapes throughout their lives.

A review of theoretical literature highlights the school library as an environment conducive to self-directed learning, as it offers students the autonomy to decide where and how

they will learn. Although part of the school structure, library visits are voluntary, providing learners with freedom of choice and control over their learning environment. Library resources can be aligned with students’ interests, enabling exploration of topics beyond the curriculum and fostering deeper understanding and intrinsic motivation. In this way, the school library becomes a space where students select materials that engage them—an essential component of self-directed learning.

## **The Impact of Students’ Reading Interest on Library Visits and the Promotion of Self-Directed Learning**

### ***Research Methodology***

The study employed a survey as the primary data collection method, conducted at the school involved in the research in September 2024. Its aim was to examine how students’ interest in reading influences their habits of visiting the school library and to explore the potential role of school libraries in promoting self-directed learning. The study applied a quantitative survey design to collect primary data. A structured questionnaire was administered to 292 students from 5th to 9th grade at the school involved in the research in September 2024.

The survey included both closed-ended questions and Likert-type scales to measure students’ reading interest and library visit habits.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage) and inferential statistics, including Spearman’s rank correlation to examine the relationship between reading enjoyment and library visits. The significance level was set at  $p < .001$ , and results were visualized through tables and figures for clarity.

This empirical approach allowed for identifying patterns and statistically significant associations between variables, providing evidence-based insights into how reading interest influences library use and self-directed learning.

### ***Analysis of the research results***

The table 1 presents factors that promote self-directed learning in a school library, based on research by Radolović (2020), Wimmer et al. (2024), and Loyens et al. (2008). It consists of two main factors:

- Interest in Reading (I)
  - Encourages motivation for independent learning.
  - Enhances concentration skills.
  - Supports understanding of text without external help.
- Visiting the School Library (II)
  - Provides students with freedom of choice to be in the library.
  - Allows autonomy in managing their own learning process.

*Table 1. Factors promoting self-directed learning in school library (Radolović, 2020; Wimmer, Currie, Friend, Wittwer & Ferguson, 2024; Loyens, Magda & Rikers, 2008)*

<b>Factors promoting self-directed learning in school library</b>	
Interest in reading	It promotes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• motivation to learn independently.</li> <li>• high concentration skills.</li> <li>• understanding of text without external assistance.</li> </ul>
Visiting school library	The student has: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• freedom of choice to be there.</li> <li>• freedom to manage their own learning.</li> </ul>

The results indicate that students' enjoyment of reading (I like reading: Q\_1 I really enjoy reading books; Q\_2 I am interested in reading; Q\_3 Reading fascinates me) is positively associated with their self-reported frequency of library visits (Q\_15 I visit school library) (see Figure 1). A statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ) moderate correlation ( $r_s = .325$ ) was found between library visits and students' enjoyment of reading books.

This suggests that students who enjoy reading are more likely to visit the school library regularly. Data show that 41% of students rated their enjoyment of reading at 4 or higher on the scale, and an equal proportion (41%) reported that they rather enjoy or enjoy visiting the library. However, a considerable number of students expressed a neutral attitude toward both reading and library visits, with this combination being the most common (13.4%). Additionally, a notable group of students reported a neutral stance on library visits despite rating their enjoyment of reading relatively high (at least 4). This discrepancy may indicate that these students have access to appealing books at home or that they are not fully satisfied with the resources available in the school library.

*Table 2. Correlation between school library visits and enjoyment of reading (N=292) (Data from author's own study, 2025)*

			Q 15 I visit the school library.					Pearson Chi-Square	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Spearman Rho
			1	2	3	4	5				
Q 1 2 3 I like reading	1	% of Total	2,4%	1,0%	2,1%	1,0%	1,4%	50,828 <sup>a</sup>	16	<.001	.325
	2	% of Total	3,4%	4,8%	4,5%	1,4%	1,7%				
	3	% of Total	4,1%	5,5%	13,4%	7,2%	4,8%				
	4	% of Total	1,4%	2,4%	7,2%	6,2%	7,2%				
	5	% of Total	1,7%	0,3%	4,1%	3,8%	7,2%				

Students who enjoy reading are more motivated to learn independently because they are able to concentrate for longer periods of time, search for information, and understand texts without external assistance (Wimmer, Currie, Friend, Wittwer & Ferguson, 2024). This leads to the conclusion that reading is one of the key skills that promotes self-directed learning—it develops the ability to acquire information independently, think critically, and reflect.

Empirical findings from the study confirm that students' enjoyment of reading correlates positively with their self-reported frequency of library visits. Since visiting the library is a voluntary activity, this suggests that a love of reading promotes self-directed learning, as regular library use reflects initiative and interest in learning beyond the classroom. However, the study also revealed that some students who enjoy reading do not visit the school library. This may be due to access to books at home or dissatisfaction with the library's offerings.

## Conclusions

Promoting reading habits and encouraging library use emerge as powerful strategies for cultivating self-directed learning skills among students. The study confirms that reading interest strongly influences library engagement, which in turn supports autonomy and critical thinking—competencies essential for lifelong learning. Schools should not only monitor these indicators but also employ them diagnostically to identify learners who may need targeted

interventions to strengthen independence and motivation. Creating an inviting reading culture requires integrating enjoyable, voluntary reading activities into the curriculum and ensuring that libraries provide diverse, high-quality resources tailored to students' interests. Furthermore, future research should explore the impact of digital reading platforms, parental involvement, and community partnerships in sustaining these habits. Strengthening reading culture in schools is more than an educational goal—it is a strategic investment in preparing independent, resilient learners equipped for success in a knowledge-driven society.

The study underscores the pivotal role of reading habits and library engagement in shaping students' autonomy and self-directed learning skills. By fostering a positive reading culture and ensuring easy access to diverse resources, schools can create environments that encourage independent inquiry and critical thinking. These practices not only enhance academic achievement but also prepare learners for lifelong education in an increasingly knowledge-driven world. To maximize impact, educational strategies should integrate voluntary reading opportunities, leverage digital platforms, and involve families in promoting sustained reading habits. Ultimately, investing in reading and library initiatives is an investment in developing adaptable, motivated learners equipped for future challenges.

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