

One year of extensive reading on mobile devices: engagement and impressions

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Abstract. Extensive Reading (ER) is a popular strategy to improve reading fluency, vocabulary knowledge and reading confidence. The process of ER, traditionally done with paperbacks, is a practice being transformed by smartphone technology. This paper introduces Xreading® (www.xreading.com), an online Graded Reader (GR) library and Learning Management System (LMS) devoted specifically to digital management of extensive reading. For language teaching faculty, Xreading provides a dynamic, ER management system that can negate a range of challenges teachers have faced when implementing an effective ER component. In this one year study at a private Japanese university, students were required to use their smartphone or PC to access the online library of GR's and read extensively on either of these devices. This paper reports on student engagement with this platform and shares feedback from a post-pilot questionnaire and focus group discussion to describe student impressions of this digital approach.

Keywords: extensive reading, MALL, Xreading, e-book reading.

1. Introduction

1.1. Extensive reading

The increasing interest in incorporating extensive reading components into English language programs are representative of the growing body of research advocating the language learning benefits of this approach. Studies (e.g. [Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2012](#)) have been able to empirically demonstrate the superiority of ER over other

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approaches – such as intensive reading – for developing second language students' reading and linguistic skills. Most extensive reading programs share a common purpose: that learners read large quantities of self-selected, simplified texts in an environment which promotes a liking of the act of reading (Day & Bamford, 1998; Renandya, 2007).

Despite the reported benefits of ER, there is less agreement concerning the best ways to implement ER in the language classroom (Fenton-Smith, 2008). In addition, language teachers have reported a variety of challenges which include: the cost of assembling a library with titles which spread across a variety of genres, while also satisfying the varying levels of student reading proficiencies (Day & Bamford, 1998), how to hold students accountable for their reading (Robb & Kano, 2013) and how teachers can find time to provide adequate reading support.

1.2. The need for an online approach

Successful implementation of an ER component depends equally upon the students and their commitment to the approach. As outlined above, ER can contribute to language learning; however, recent research provides a realistic look at the quantity of reading required for those benefits to be significant (Beglar & Hunt, 2014; Beglar et al., 2012). Beglar and Hunt (2014), and Nation and Wang (1999) noted that students must read 200,000 words or more per year for learning benefits to be observed. Pushing students towards these lofty benchmarks represent a departure from basic ER ideology (e.g. Day & Bamford, 1998) which promotes a self-selected, intrinsic approach. How can teachers effectively exercise their pedagogical powers to motivate students to read in such large quantities?

1.3. E-book ER

The lower costs of e-books, and the ability to share e-books through 24-hour online libraries, has prompted institutions to investigate e-reading and how they can incorporate it into curricula (Gerlich, Browning, & Westermann, 2011). Unlike traditional books, e-books allow readers to customize their reading experience, for example, tailoring font style, size and screen layout. E-books also support access to multimedia features, such as hyperlinks, glossaries, audio narration and links to online dictionaries (Huang, 2013; Lai & Chang, 2011). Additionally, some e-book systems provide the user with a range of feedback on their reading progress (Brown, 2012; Huang, 2013). Online reading systems can chronicle book details and the reading process, including reading speeds, post-reading quiz results, book levels, the total words read and time spent reading. With this feedback, students can

track their reading progress and teachers can precisely, and promptly, identify those who might need extra support (Brown, 2012).

The authors of this study hoped that the aforementioned benefits of e-books, and an online GR library, would allow them to overcome a number of the challenges observed during their own implementation of ER. In addition, the ease of access, multimedia functions, and feedback features would enable more students to read the large volumes prescribed by experts in the field (e.g. Beglar & Hunt, 2014; Day & Bamford, 1998; Nation & Wang, 1999).

1.4. Xreading

Launched in April 2014, Xreading is an online GR library and learning management system (LMS) devoted to ER. There are approximately 500 books in the Xreading library, and an individual, one-year license (US \$19.40, July 2015 rate) grants access to all books in the library, including post-reading quizzes. Answers to the quizzes are scored and recorded by the LMS. The Xreading site is accessible via mobile device or PC and since it is a virtual library, multiple users can read the same book. Another useful feature is that users can choose to listen to audio of the GR, thereby supporting opportunities to engage in extensive listening. For teachers, administrators and students alike, the LMS functionality allows monitoring of reading progress, including words-per-minute counts, total words read, books read, total reading time, and quiz results.

2. Research

2.1. Research participants

This study was initiated in two English as a lingua franca (ELF) classes taught by one of the authors at a private university in Tokyo, Japan. The average TOEIC score for the participant sample was 512 (CEFR level A2) and the ER component accounted for 10% of the final grade. This percentage was a reflection of the total number of words read (students were expected to read in excess of 50,000 words to receive the full 10%), reading comprehension scores (tallied within the Xreading LMS) and quantity of student engagement as reported by usage log data.

2.2. Student engagement

Table 1 below provides a summary of student engagement with the system during the 2014 academic year. As suggested by the total average words read (13,502),

students failed to read the quantities desired by the authors and vastly below the benchmarks prescribed by leading researchers in the field.

Table 1. Summary of student engagement: total words read per class and average number of words read per student over the 2014 academic year

Class number & Semester	Total words read per-class	Average number of words read per-student
1 (n=20) Spring	232,390	15,492
1 (n=20) Fall	185,540	9,277
2 (n=15) Spring	240,210	12,010
2 (n=15) Fall	168,751	11,250

3. Student perceptions

3.1. Post-pilot questionnaire

Participants completed an online questionnaire during the final class of the academic year and a total of 30 students responded. Despite the poor engagement results (see Table 1), 25 students (83%) agreed and three (10%) strongly agreed with the statement, “I like reading in English”. When asked how they would like to read a graded reader in the future, 16 (53%) chose on my smartphone and eight (27%) chose on their PC. This response suggests that students are not opposed to reading an e-book and most appear to want to read on their smartphone. Surprisingly, a total of 93% of students were in agreement with the statement “After using Xreading in this class it is more enjoyable to read in English”, and an additional 82% were in agreement with the statement, “After using Xreading in this class it is easier to read in English”. Students were also asked to list what they liked and disliked about Xreading. The high frequency of responses citing the convenience of the system and an interesting variety of books provide some insight into why students voiced such positive responses to the reading experience.

However, the question remains: if students had such a positive perception of the Xreading system and reading e-books, why did they read so little? This discrepancy

pushed the authors to stage a short Focus Group Discussion (FGD) at the end of the course and a more detailed report can be found in [Milliner and Cote \(2015\)](#). Some of the key findings from the FGD included: students need better training in using the system, specifically on how to choose books at the appropriate linguistic level for them; teachers need to establish smaller, incremental word targets throughout the semester; and lastly, teachers need to spend more time raising awareness about the purpose of, and principles behind, ER.

4. Conclusions

The authors of this one year pilot study found that although students appeared to have a positive perception of e-books, reading on their smartphone and using an online library, actual reading engagement suggests a different story. This study has revealed that as teachers, our role in the ER process is still crucial, whether it is done with traditional paperbacks or via an online system. Teachers need to effectively make the case for ER, promote student interest in reading, and call upon their pedagogical strength to motivate students to read consistently. Furthermore, if extensive reading is done electronically, teachers must carefully provide software training and ongoing support.

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