Student perceptions of an online extensive reading platform

by

Mark HOWARTH* *and* **David BOLLEN***

Abstract

Extensive reading (ER) has been shown to have a number of positive effects for learning a foreign language. Improvements in vocabulary size, reading fluency and comprehension, and grammatical accuracy are just some of the outcomes of extensive reading programs. Since 2011, extensive reading at Sojo University has been carried out through the use of graded readers, typically in the form of physical books made available to students either in class or through the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC). Recently, the popularity of reading texts in digital format has increased with the universal ownership of portable devices such as smartphones, tablets, and lightweight laptops. In April 2018, all second-year students at Sojo University were required to purchase a subscription to the Xreading website (www.xreading.com), which offers hundreds of graded readers in digital format. This study examines student perceptions of this platform. A total of 730 second-year students participated in the study, and the results appear to indicate that students feel extensive reading in general is a worthwhile activity to help them improve their English, but that the digital format provided by Xreading is not necessarily an improvement over physical books.

Key Words：Xreading，extensive reading，graded readers，student perceptions

1. Introduction

The simplest definition of extensive reading (ER) is reading a large number of texts which are easy for the reader to understand and, ideally, pleasurable to read (Day & Bamford, 2002). For learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), this is typically achieved through the use of graded readers or simplified texts created by the teacher. In contrast to ER, intensive reading is what one would find in a typical EFL "reading" textbook, with a focus on shorter texts employing more complex grammatical structures, vocabulary, and post-reading comprehension questions. Intensive reading is more often used in Japanese high school English classes, often leading to a lack of interest in, and enthusiasm for, reading in English (Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007). While intensive reading activities have a specific goal or learning outcome in mind, for example a set of target vocabulary or a particular reading skill, the main goal of extensive reading is for incidental learning to occur (Krashen, 1989). Learners acquire vocabulary or grammar items not by explicitly practicing them in a textbook, but more so through repeated encounters while doing large amounts of reading (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006). Intensive reading has been the traditional approach to language learning, with extensive reading only coming to be

＊Senior Assistant Professor, Sojo University

widely used in the past decade. While both extensive and intensive approaches to reading have been shown to be beneficial for second language learners, this study focuses on the introduction of extensive reading to second year students at Sojo University and their perceptions of this approach to reading.

There is strong evidence to support an extensive reading program for second language learners. Numerous studies have shown that a well-implemented ER program can improve learners' vocabulary (Chen, Chen, Chen & Wey, 2013; Krashen, 2004; Nation, 1997), reading proficiency and fluency (Nation, 2009; Robb & Kano, 2013), and even seemingly unrelated skills such as writing (Krashen, 2004) and speaking (Cho & Krashen, 1994). For the current study, participants were asked to reflect on the impact of extensive reading on their overall reading ability, vocabulary, grammar, and reading speed. A brief review of the literature on the impact that extensive reading has on each of these skills will now be discussed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Benefits of ER on vocabulary

Perhaps the most researched area in terms of extensive reading is that of vocabulary. Extensive reading is mostly done through the use of graded readers, which, as noted above, consist of simplified texts using high frequency vocabulary. It follows, then, that any improvements seen in vocabulary knowledge while doing extensive reading will occur in the most frequently used words in English. Learning the 3,000 most frequently used words in English is an essential first step in mastering English (Nation, 2001). Many Japanese university students, including those at Sojo University, have a vague familiarity with many of these words but have not mastered them yet. Extensive reading can help with deepening the knowledge learners have of these words especially in terms of spelling, multiple meanings, and grammatical usage (Pigada &

Schmitt, 2006). Studies have shown that automatic recognition of sight words also improves through the use of graded readers and repeated encounters (Coady, 1997).

While there have been studies which argue that the evidence for gains in vocabulary knowledge using the ER approach are suspect (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999), the consensus appears to be that ER is an effective way for learners to enhance their knowledge of high frequency vocabulary. The fact that much of this learning can take place outside of class time and does not necessitate explicit learning during the class, enables teachers to free up class time to practice other aspects of language learning (Nation, 2001).

2.2 Benefits of ER on reading fluency

One of the essential requirements for reading to be considered ER is that the text is easy enough for the reader to read quickly and relatively effortlessly. Combined with a large quantity of texts, the amount of reading and ease with which it is done allows for a flood of comprehensible input, which is an important ingredient for language learning to occur (Krashen, 1989). According to the theory of automatic information processing, Samuels (1994) claims that if learners are devoting too much of their attention to decoding individual words, then comprehension of the text is compromised. Because graded readers consist mainly of high frequency vocabulary and simplified grammar constructions, the reader can devote more of their attention to understanding the meaning of the text instead of decoding unknown words.

Numerous studies have shown that ER can positively influence reading fluency. Iwahori (2008), in an experiment with Japanese high school students, found that the number of words read per minute significantly increased after a 7-week ER program. Nation (2009) lists a number of activities which can help learners increase their reading speed.

He argues that an activity such as ER can be very effective for improving reading speed, especially for learners at the beginning stages of language development, which our students at Sojo University clearly are. He notes that extensive reading for fluency development "should involve texts where there are virtually no unknown words", so learners can read large amounts of texts easily and quickly (Nation, 2009, p. 140).

2.3 Benefits of ER on grammar

Much as vocabulary and reading fluency can be improved through exposure to large amounts of comprehensible input, grammatical accuracy has also been shown to improve as a result of ER (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Sheu, 2003). Repeated exposures to basic grammar forms, such as the simple present tense, can help solidify basic grammar constructions. Explicit grammar practice becomes unnecessary as students learn grammar implicitly or incidentally. A study by Sheu (2003) found that students who read graded readers or other books written for native speaking children out-performed a control group significantly in terms of reading comprehension and grammar assessments. Sheu (2003) argued that the sheer amount of reading of easy texts done by the experimental groups, and the repeated exposures to simple grammatical structures, helped improve their grammar and vocabulary compared to the control group which read fewer, more complex texts.

2.4 Benefits of ER on overall reading ability

In addition to ER helping students to become more fluent readers, it has also been shown that learners become more proficient readers in general. Robb and Kano (2013) found that reading scores on a standardized test showed a significant gain for students who undertook ER compared to a group which hadn't. As they rightly point out, the gains could be explained by the fact that the ER group simply had more contact hours with the target language compared to the group which did not do

extensive reading. However, as they also note, it is difficult to think of activities other than extensive reading which could reasonably be added to a course and completed outside of class time.

2.5 Online extensive reading (Xreading)

Now that the benefits of ER have been shown, it is important to consider how best to go about implementing an ER program in a university context. For years, students at Sojo University have had access to graded readers in the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC). Bollen, Langdon, and Pain (2014) describe the nature of the ER approach at Sojo University using the Moodle Reader module to assess progress in reading. At the time, an online repository of graded readers did not exist, so students were asked to go to the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) to choose from approximately 1,500 books and take a quiz using Moodle Reader. While Bollen, Langdon, and Pain (2014) report that the new approach seemed to be successful, especially in terms of holding students accountable for what they read by taking the quizzes through Moodle Reader, there were clearly some hurdles to overcome. There was a limited number of graded readers in the library at the "Starter" level, which meant students were sometimes forced to read books that were above their ability. Some glitches in the software raised frustration levels for both teachers and students at times, and there were clearly many instances of students doing the bulk of their reading all at once toward the end of the semester in an attempt to pass the course. This goes against the important principle of ER which holds that reading should be pleasurable and done for its own sake, not for assessment purposes.

For the academic year 2018 a new approach was undertaken. All second-year students were required to purchase a subscription to a website called Xreading (www.xreading.com). This website provides students with access to about 800 graded readers through an online, virtual library. Students

can search for and read books using their phone, tablet, or computer, eliminating the need to borrow a physical book. Almost every book in the library has a quiz which students can take to demonstrate that they have indeed read the book. It also has the benefit of a learner management system which allows the teacher to track student progress on the number of books read, number of words read, and reading speed. The benefits of accessibility to books and a means to hold students accountable for reading the books is what has made Xreading a popular platform in many universities in Japan (Cote & Millner, 2015).

3. Research Questions and Methodology

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions of their experience using Xreading?

2. To what extent do students feel that Xreading improved specific aspects of their English ability, specifically vocabulary, grammar, reading speed, and overall reading ability?

To answer these questions, students were asked to complete a survey at the end of the first semester in academic year 2018. A total of 730 students completed the survey, all second-year students from a variety of majors. Students were told that the survey was completely voluntary and that the data would be used for research purposes only. Given the exploratory nature of the current study, the survey was kept short and simple to complete, taking less than two minutes of the students' time. All items and responses were written in Japanese, with English translations provided in this paper.

4. Results

The first item on the survey sought to get basic information on how the students chose to access Xreading. As Table 1 shows, the vast majority of students used their smartphones to access books on the site, which speaks to the appeal of accessibility the site offers. Students are able to read virtually anywhere and they appear to be taking advantage of this feature. About one-third of the students indicated that they most often used a PC or tablet to access the site. While we cannot say for sure, it seems likely these students preferred the larger screen that a PC or tablet offers, which makes reading and navigating the books easier.

Table-1　*How did you most often access Xreading? (Choose one)*

	Responses	Percentage
Smartphone	484	69.2%
PC	131	19.7%
Tablet	82	12.7%
Other	2	0.3%

The next item on the survey asked students to self-report on how many books they read during the semester. Table 2 shows that almost all students read between 0-20 books over the course of 15 weeks, and these numbers are supported by data on the Xreading site which showed that the average number of books read was 13.2. Also according to the data on Xreading, students read an average of only 5,724 words during the semester. This is well below the recommended amount of extensive reading necessary for improvements in language proficiency. Nishizawa, Yoshioka, and Fukuda (2010) found that ER programs should require students to read upwards of 300,000 words a semester for any real benefits to occur. While not the within the scope of this paper, perhaps a future direction of this research could look into why such a small amount of reading took place.

Table-2 *About how many books did you read on Xreading? (Choose one)*

	Responses	Percentage
0-5	135	19.3%
6-10	186	26.6%
11-20	334	47.8%
21-30	40	5.7%
31-50	4	0.6%
51+	0	0.0%

Item 3 sought to collect information on the utility of the website and how easy it was for students to find books suitable for them. Results were mostly positive, with 85% of the respondents indicating that they at least found it somewhat easy to find suitable materials on the website. As shown in Table 3, only about 14% of the students found it difficult to find suitable books. This is encouraging, as there were some technical difficulties reported by teachers and students at the beginning of the semester, but it appears they were able to get past those issues and could access books that suited their level.

Table-3 *It was easy to find suitable books to read on Xreading.*

Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
109 (16%)	265 (38%)	228 (32%)	63 (9%)	16 (2%)	17 (2%)

The aim of the following item was to ascertain whether students preferred reading digital books to traditional, paper-based books. As seen in Table 4, more than half the students (53.9%) indicated that they would rather read a paper-based book than a digital one. There have been some studies that found students complained of eye-strain and headaches while reading on an electronic device (Huang & Lin, 2011), and others which found students felt like they read slower when reading texts on their smartphones as compared to a paper book (Mesureur, 2013). The current study did not ask students to elaborate on their preference, but would

be an interesting path to pursue.

Table-4 *I would rather read a paper book than a book on Xreading.*

Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
89 (13%)	122 (18%)	165 (24%)	221 (32%)	67 (10%)	34 (5%)

The next items asked about the functionality of the website and their overall enjoyment of using Xreading. Tables 5 and 6 show that students did not have much trouble accessing and navigating the website. Another positive sign is that only about 7% of the students found the website completely unenjoyable, as seen in Table 7. Perhaps this is an indication that students' lack of reading was not due to shortcomings of the website, but a general disinterest in reading.

Table-5 *It was easy to access the Xreading website.*

Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
154 (22%)	202 (29%)	171 (25%)	107 (15%)	38 (6%)	24 (4%)

Table-6 *It was easy to navigate the Xreading website.*

Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
112 (16%)	232 (33%)	224 (32%)	85 (12%)	22 (3%)	24 (3%)

Table-7 *Using Xreading was enjoyable.*

Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
88 (13%)	198 (28%)	248 (36%)	114 (16%)	24 (3%)	25 (4%)

The last set of items aimed to measure how effective the students perceived Xreading to be in improving their English ability. Tables 8-12 show that most respondents either agreed or somewhat agreed that Xreading helped them improve in various aspects of their English study. That being said, as the final item shows, about half the students do not plan on continuing to use the website on their own. This is disconcerting, as one of the principles of ER is for students to find reading pleasurable and continue with it of their own volition, and it does not appear as though their experience has fostered such a feeling.

Table-8　*Reading books on Xreading helped to improve my overall reading ability.*

Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
96 (14%)	256 (37%)	261 (38%)	54 (8%)	17 (2%)	12 (2%)

Table-9　*Reading books on Xreading helped to improve my vocabulary.*

Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
84 (12%)	267 (38%)	261 (38%)	56 (8%)	14 (2%)	15 (2%)

Table-10　*Reading books on Xreading helped to improve my knowledge of English grammar.*

Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
73 (11%)	223 (32%)	282 (41%)	85 (12%)	14 (2%)	17 (3%)

Table-11　*Reading books on Xreading helped to improve my reading speed.*

Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
98 (14%)	248 (36%)	255 (37%)	66 (10%)	15 (2%)	14 (2%)

Table-12　*I will continue to use Xreading on my own.*

Strongly agree	Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
44 (6%)	105 (15%)	221 (32%)	201 (29%)	70 (10%)	56 (8%)

5. Conclusion

In summary, the results of the survey are somewhat encouraging. In the end, students generally found the website to be a convenient way to access suitable materials for doing their ER homework. Interestingly, though, they did not appear to have a strong preference for digital books over paper-based books.

In addition, students felt that the activity of ER helped their English in a variety of ways, especially their reading speed and overall reading ability. However, this finding may be suspect, given the very low amount of reading that was done by most students. It could be the case that students recognize the effectiveness of the activity but simply do not have the time or motivation to pursue it rigorously.

One must also remember that these are simply the students' perceptions of ER and Xreading. In future studies, the authors plan to conduct research which tests to see how accurate these perceptions are. This study was simply a first step to ascertain whether or not students enjoyed and recognized the value of Xreading as a language learning resource. Further studies can now be undertaken to measure its actual effectiveness.

Acknowledgements

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