

Practice Report

Extensive Reading Using Online Platform: Student Preferences

Ayano Valvona (Sueyoshi)

a-sueyoshi@okinawa-u.ac.jp

Abstract

This report explored students' perceived effects of extensive reading (ER), and their preferences on the method of reading paper books and e-books while keeping a reading journal vs. only e-books coupled with comprehension quizzes via a learning platform. Japanese university students in a first-year English class went through an ER program; in the first semester they kept reading journals and in the second semester they took comprehension quizzes through an online platform. According to a survey given at the end of the course, students indicated the efficacy of ER: gaining reading speed and fluency, and inference skills. Also, using online reading via a learning platform with comprehension quizzes was seen to be a preferable way of completing the ER project. The paper also explores the possibility of ER research and application in the future.

Keywords: extensive reading, online platform, motivation, student preferences

Introduction

1. Reading Comprehension in the Language Classroom

Of all four language skills, learners often tend to find it difficult to know their progress in reading since it is considered as a passive skill in which learners do not produce anything. From the teacher's perspective, it is much easier to correct students' errors when you can 'see' the mistake. So, it is hard to offer effective instruction.

In order to give effective reading instruction in the target language, it is important to expose students to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981, as cited in Ellis, 2014)—that is to say, as a teacher, you have to make sure that students are exposed to comprehensible, level-appropriate target language. However, it is difficult to find the right level because reading skills need to take into account students' reading habits, reading speed, vocabulary level, comprehension, and other skills such as inferencing or guessing unknown words. And, it is the case that in "far too many reading classrooms around the world the texts that students are asked to read are at a difficult level of reading" (Anderson, 2014).

Anderson (2014) also suggests that to become engaged readers students should focus on

meaning in the texts, have a purpose for reading, comprehend what they have read, use reading strategies such as skimming and scanning, and be motivated to read. In contrast, unsuccessful readers have a lack of reading fluency and automaticity, and an inability to automatically understand meaning in texts without stopping and thinking. He also argues that to become engaged readers at intermediate level is vital to be a successful language learner.

Despite the importance of creating engaged readers for language learning, it is doubtful that the Japanese language education system supports that trend. Sakai (2008) argues that English in the Japanese education system does not expose students to a sufficient amount and quality of English reading materials, and that is one of the reasons why Japanese students cannot use English.

2. Extensive Reading

Extensive reading (ER) is a reading pedagogy where students choose their own reading materials. This reading method is helpful in the language classroom because by allowing students to choose their own reading materials, it solves the problem of learners being tasked with too difficult a reading text. Unlike intensive reading, which involves reading and re-reading while paying close attention to different aspects of the language including vocabulary, grammar, syntax and so on, ER focuses more on fluency. Day and Bamford (2002) propose ten principles of ER, of which three well-understood principles among language instructors are: “A variety of reading material on a wide range of topics must be available,” “Learners choose what they want to read,” and “Learners read as much as possible” (Day & Bamford, 2002).

Recent studies show the benefit of employing ER in the language classroom. ER helps students acquire vocabulary (Al-Homound & Schmitt, 2009; Leo & Krashen, 2000) and improves reading fluency or helps students’ reading speed (Al-Homound & Schmitt, 2009; Leo & Krashen, 2000) and comprehension (Al-Homound & Schmitt, 2009; Leo & Krashen, 2000). In addition, students also reported that ER facilitated their language learning (Zhou & Day, 2021), and having self-reflection on their achievements helped boost students’ motivation and confidence to study (Takeuchi & Begole, 2015).

Regardless of the popular demand for ER in language instruction, there are still challenges. The nature of this style of reading is to encourage students to take initiative in their reading activities. Some scholars argue that this process should not be evaluated because students may lose motivation. However, when you implement ER in a classroom, naturally the instructor has to give some sort of assessment, and that becomes a problem. Since all students are reading a different amount of material at different speeds, how could any teacher give a score? The difficulty in implementing ER is exacerbated by difficulties in monitoring students’ achievement (Chang & Renandya, 2017), even though teachers’ encouragement is important in students’ success in ER (Yoshida, 2017).

3. Xreading

Xreading is an online ER platform containing more than 1,500 graded reader books avail-

able on the virtual library platform. Students have access to any books at any time on their smartphones, tablets, or PCs. Unlike conventional libraries, there is no limit to how many books students can access at any one time, and there is no time limit for “borrowed” books to be “returned,” so students can feel at ease to engage in their reading activity. There are useful functions such as audio on demand which allows students to listen to a story and learn pronunciation. It also offers a level-check test at the beginning of the course so that students can check their reading level, which helps them choose the right materials. Reading at the right level is very important for high-volume reading so having a universal level system makes it easier for learners to choose something appropriate to themselves. Students can also search books by title, genre, level, and word count. If a student prefers reading physical books from the library, they can still read them and either keep a record on the platform or take a quiz to confirm and record having read it.

From the teachers' point of view, there are also many benefits of using Xreading in a language class. One may be the tracking function for students' progress. Information such as books read, word count, reading speed, and comprehension rate from the quizzes are all available so the teacher can use this information to encourage students or even assess them. Such data will be difficult to acquire for paper-based program (Wilkins, 2019), and the teacher can use the time for other activities related to ER instead of book reports (Wilkins, 2019).

Procedure

ER is implemented as part of a first-year university general English class at a Japanese university. This twice-a-week class across two semesters functions as a language requirement course for some majors which could also be waived if a student shows sufficient English level in a standardized test such as STEP or TOEIC. 29 students in the first semester and 28 in the second semester were enrolled in the class, majoring in various courses such as International Communication, Welfare and Culture, Child Studies, Health and Nutrition, as well as the Department of Law, Economics and Management. The course book is based on a grammar syllabus; however, students were assigned to engage in self-study in vocabulary, journal writing, and ER with the help of the instructor. This class was the third-highest English proficiency of 13 classes. For the first semester, students engaged in ER with physical books from the library and when it was difficult to come onto campus due to COVID-19, students were encouraged to use online reading materials such as Oxford Owl. For this ER, students were asked to write a summary of a book they had read as a record, and give brief feedback on the book. They also kept an “ER record sheet” to keep count of the number of words they had read. For the second semester, students were assigned to read online reading material using Xreading. For this assignment, students took Xreading quizzes to give proof of their reading record as well as check their comprehension of the book. The goal was set for reading 20,000 words each semester. Both semesters, one class was allocated to explain about the assignment and students started reading the first book on that day.

An end-of-term survey in Japanese was distributed to investigate students' attitudes to-

wards ER in general as part of feedback of the entire class. Some questions were targeted to find out students' preferred ways of implementing ER: traditional hardcopy or online. The questions also aimed to learn about students' attitudes towards reading in general.

Results and Discussion

27 out of 28 students responded to the questionnaire. In order to check students' attitude towards reading in general, questions such as "I like reading" (Figure 1), "I read (including comics and magazine)" (Figure 2) "If you read, what do you read?" (Figure 3), and "How often I read-on screen including PC, smartphone and tablet" (Figure 4) were also included in the questionnaire. The feedback from students shows that fewer than half of the students (41%) showed a preferable attitude towards reading in general, and about half (48%) said they read regularly. However, about a third of students (31%) did not like reading and a similar number reported they did not read (33%). The preferred reading materials varied from internet articles to comic books but the most popular one was comic books (54%). As for time spent on reading on screen, 43% of students spent 30 minutes to one hour, 26% spent one to two hours, 18% spent less than 30 minutes, 11% spent three to four hours, and 4% spent 4 to 5 hours. No one spent more than five hours, which was one of the choices.

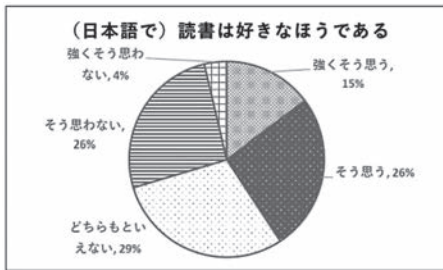


Figure 1. Students' attitude towards reading in general.

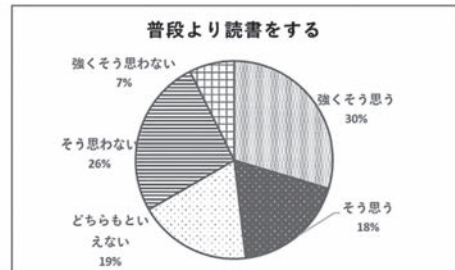


Figure 2. Students' reading habits.

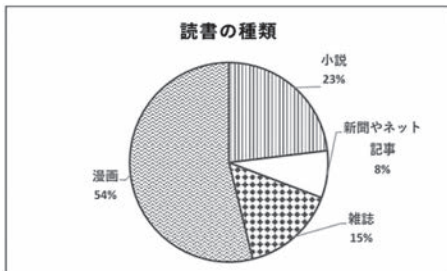


Figure 3. Kinds of reading materials students engage with.

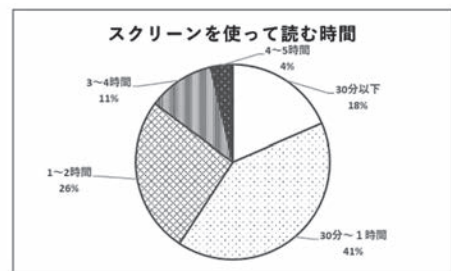


Figure 4. Student time spent reading on-screen.

The next set of questions was targeted to find out about students' attitude towards ER. 81% of students responded that ER was fun (3% strongly agree, and 78% agree) (Figure 5), and many students thought they could read English text without a dictionary (81% strongly agree,

and 4% agree) (Figure 6). In addition, more than half of students responded that they got accustomed to reading English texts (4% strongly agree and 55% agree), and the vast majority responded that their reading speed improved (15% strongly agree, and 74% agree) (Figures 7 and 8). After going through ER instruction, more than 70% of students do not feel 'fear' or resistance against reading assignments (15% strongly agree, and 56% agree), and the majority of students responded that they want to keep reading English even after this project (26% strongly agree, and 37% agree) (see Figures 9 and 10).

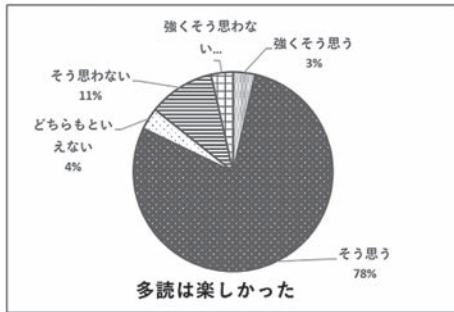


Figure 5. Attitude towards ER.

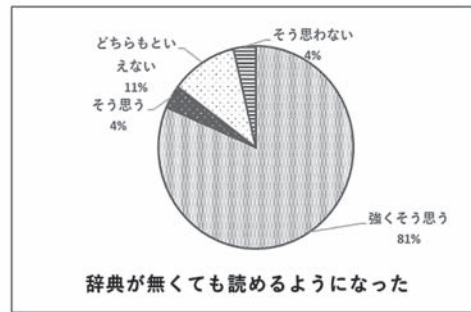


Figure 6. Students' perception of ability to read English texts without a dictionary.

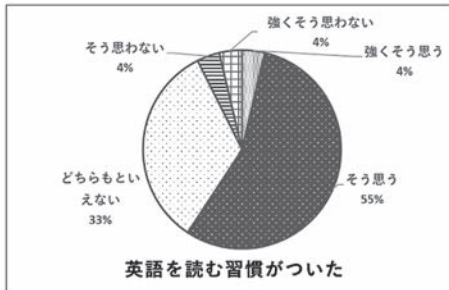


Figure 7. Students' perception of reading habits.

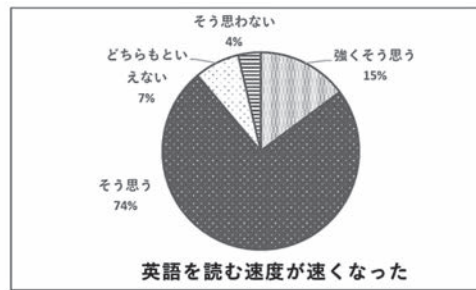


Figure 8. Students' perception of reading speed.

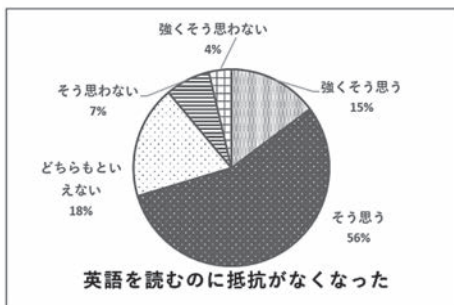


Figure 9. Students' attitude towards reading assignments.

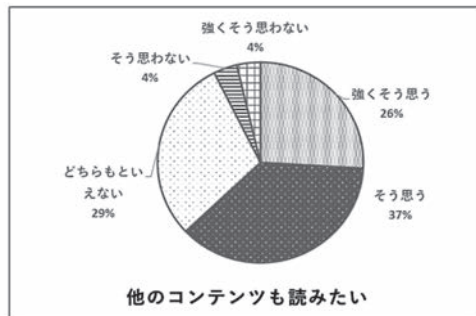


Figure 10. Students' attitude towards reading outside of this reading project.

The last set of questions were established to discover which method of ER students preferred. Figure 11 shows that 89% (24 students) of students preferred reading English books on the Xreading platform, and only 11% (3) preferred conventional physical library books. For those who preferred library books, “reading journal writing was good for study,” “having a sense of accomplishment,” “reading screen tires my eyes,” “there are varieties of books,” and “easy to read” were chosen one time each (more than one choice was available) (Figure 12). The reasons for choosing Xreading were because “it was easy to read” (18 students), “don’t need to keep a reading journal” (16), “seeing data gives a sense of accomplishment (14), “accessibility” (10), and “varieties of books available” (7), (Figure 13). “Seeing words read getting close to the target words” (23) was the number one factor for raising motivation, followed by “seeing books in the account” (10), “taking comprehension quizzes” (8), and “seeing announcement of words read ranking” (6), but no one thought “using Xreading in the PC room in class” led to increased motivation (Figure 14).

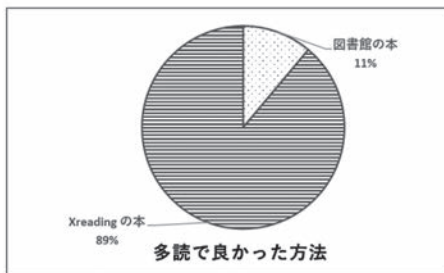


Figure 11. Preferred method of ER.

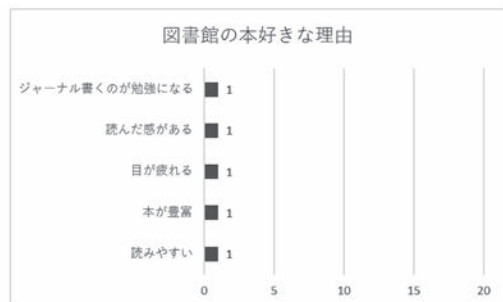


Figure 12. Reasons for choosing conventional library books.

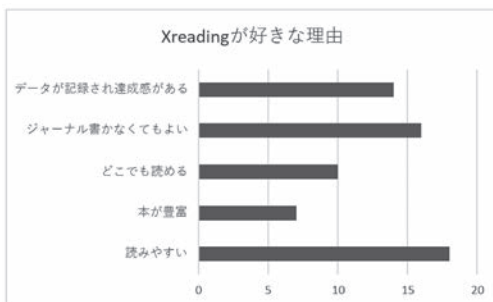


Figure 13. Reasons for choosing Xreading platform.

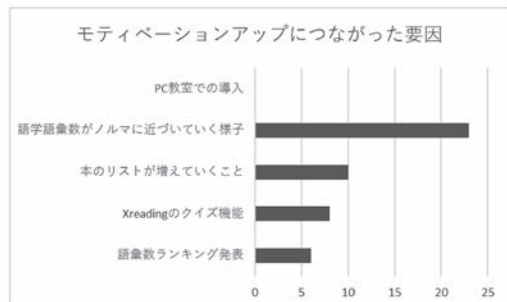


Figure 14. Motivation-raising factors of Xreading.

Open-ended questions were asked in order to investigate students’ feelings about their experience of ER and Xreading separately at the end of questionnaire. From the questions “Please write freely how you felt about ER” and “Please write freely about how you felt about the Xreading project,” feedback on ER in general is summarized in Table 1. The most frequent topic mentioned was about keeping a reading journal (6 cases), saying “it was difficult” or “time-consuming” as negative and “it helped acquire writing skills” as positive comments. Following that, there were four mentions about the assignment being “fun” and “it triggered

further motivation to study” (4). This assignment was good (1) and difficult or challenging (2) were both mentioned, and some mentioned that it gave a great opportunity to read materials in English and lowered the fear to study English (3 each). The other topics mentioned are presented in Table 1 below:

Topic	Cases
Feedback on keeping reading journal	positive: 2, negative: 4
Fun	4
Motivation to study further	4
ER as an assignment	positive: 1, negative: 2
Good opportunity	3
Decreased fear of studying English	3
Cultural reference	1
Understand own English level	1
Understand content	1
Grammar learned	1
Vocabulary learned	1

Table 1: *Summary of student feedback on ER in general.*

The feedback addressed to using Xreading is shown in Table 2. Even though students had already had a chance to mark “easier to read,” “accessibility,” “variety of books,” “no need to write journal,” and “getting visible reading record data” as reasons for liking Xreading in the previous question, many students commented in the open-ended question. The most interesting feedback which the author did not expect was that having comprehension quizzes at the end actually motivated students to do further reading or allowed them to get a sense of accomplishment, which were mentioned as frequently as accessibility. Xreading’s audio function was mentioned as a “very useful” tool to check pronunciation of the texts, and the search function helped students to choose books from their favorite genres and the right level. Two comments were made to suggest that the site was not user-friendly and needed improvement. Other comments can be found in Table 2 below:

Topic	Cases
Quiz	positive: 4, negative: 1
Accessibility	5
Audio function	3
Search function	3
Variety of books	3
Difficulty of the site	2
Good for not writing journals	2
Easy to do	2
Can read at the right level	1
Visible data	1

Table 2: *Summary of student feedback on ER using Xreading.*

Conclusion and Implications

Even though some students do not regularly read, most students showed a positive attitude towards ER, reporting that they enjoyed it, got used to reading, and gained reading speed. The most prominent response was that they were able to read without dictionaries. Gaining motivation and reading fluency are also reported in other studies (Al-Homound & Schmitt, 2009; Leo & Krashen, 2000). Comments about reading without a dictionary also indicate that students gained inferencing skills (Krashen, 1981, as cited in Ellis, 2014). It can also mean that students were able to choose their own material at their language proficiency level.

Regarding method of reading, most students reported that reading online books was a preferable way, which is similar to Shimada's findings (2017), because it was accessible from anywhere, did not require keeping a record, and was motivating. This was also shown in the number of words read; 22 students accomplished more than 20,000 words via the online platform against only 19 students using the other method. This may not seem a large difference, but the average words read increased by about 16% (from 14,634 to 16,966 words) when moving onto the online platform. This shows that students gain motivation to read more, which also relates to other studies (Takeuchi & Begole, 2015).

Even though this class was not a reading-only focus, and the reading part is only a small element of the course, students seemed to get a substantial sense of achievement. This may have been due to the fact that students were asked to do this assignment outside of the classroom, so achieving the target word count meant taking charge of their own reading and meeting that goal. Accessibility of the online platform also aided students in engaging in reading, which you can see in the students' feedback: "Because it was introduced from the second semester, I wasn't happy with Xreading, but I started from the easier books, and I sometimes used audio function while driving, and I was able to read 20,000 words. I was shocked to find myself looking for books that had more than 3,000 words. I'd like to keep reading English books." Also, confirmation of understanding the content seemed to encourage students: "There were difficult books but when I passed a quiz, I was happy to know that I understood the content in English. So, once I started passing, I was motivated to read more." Students' preferences in having comprehension quizzes were also reported in another study (Nakano, 2021). Although reading online can lead to fatigue and other negative consequences, as Agger (2008) reports (from studies by J. Nielson), and people read slower on screen than on paper by 25%, extensive online reading can foster students to be engaged readers, which is essential for language learning, as seen in the survey results.

A program using ER should be implemented in the language classroom as an effective way to foster students' reading skills, which could also lead to other skills as useful language input. However, further research is needed to offer ER to other levels in order to cross-reference the effects. Also, the application of this report is limited because, except for using reading journals or online comprehension quizzes, there was no control over reading materials; in fact, some students read a lot of e-books using Oxford Owl in the first semester. Therefore, in order to get more effective findings, future research should follow a more scientific method.

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オンライン学習プラットフォームを利用した多読：

学生の評価

要約

本稿は、通常の本を読み読書記録をつける方法と、オンラインの電子書籍を読む学習プラットフォームで読書後の内容確認クイズを受ける方法で行った多読を使ったリーディングの学生の評価を報告したものである。英語を履修する日本の大学1年生が多読を実施し、前期は読書後読書日記をつけ、後期はオンラインのプログラムを利用し理解度チェッククイズに答えた。履修終わりのアンケート調査で学生の評価を調査した結果、履修者は多読により読む速度・読解力が上がり、辞書などを使わず読む推測する力などが上がり効果的であったと自己評価したことが分かった。また、理解度チェッククイズをオンライン学習サイトを使って行う多読の方法が好ましという報告がされた。終わりに多読を使った今後の研究や英語教育への導入が提案された。