

Introducing online graded readers at the university level with Xreading

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Introduction

Extensive Reading (ER) involves reading a lot of books at a level appropriate to the reader. The books should be in a comfort zone of second language reading for the learner (Day & Bamford, 2002). For some researchers this means slightly above the learner's level and for others it is suggested that learners should read books below their comprehensible level. In their meta-review of 530 ER articles, Waring and McLean (2015) found most descriptions of ER included comprehension fluency, fast reading speed, a high volume of texts and a meaning focus.

Many ER programs involve reading *graded readers*, which have been written with simplified vocabulary and grammar, so they are easily comprehensible for language learners (Waring & Takahashi, 2000). They are written at various levels, with the idea being to progress through the levels as your reading proficiency increases.

The current manuscript describes the process of implementing a classroom activity of reading weekly graded readers and having discussions about the reading. I discuss the positives and negatives of the activity, and suggestions for improvement, with the aim of helping other instructors interested in using online graded readers.

Extensive Reading

There is lots of evidence supporting the inclusion of ER in a balanced English curriculum. The literature suggests that ER leads to improvements in areas such as reading proficiency (Nakanishi, 2015), reading speed (Iwahori, 2008), vocabulary acquisition (Webb & Nation, 2017) and possibly even speaking and listening (Cho & Krashen, 1994). At the university level in Japan, Mason and

Krashen (1997) even had positive results with *reluctant* learners, with their ER experimental group significantly outperforming their control group on a cloze test. In terms of curriculum management, Nation and Yamamoto (2012) suggest ER should constitute up to a quarter of the total course.

Despite the findings in the literature, not all instructors are convinced. Concerns from a recent ER survey of 119 teachers across Asia (Chang & Renandya, 2017) included how to incorporate ER into the curriculum, how to monitor students' reading and how to start an ER program, which they suggest could be aided by class readers, where everyone reads the same book. Some of these concerns could potentially be alleviated using online graded readers.

Xreading

Xreading (www.xreading.com) is a virtual library containing over 800 graded readers that can be accessed online for a monthly subscription fee. Potential benefits to the service over traditional books include:

- Access to a library wherever you have Internet access, including mobile devices.
- Audio, so students have the option to listen and read at different speeds.
- Any number of students can read the same book simultaneously, allowing for class or group readers without having multiple physical copies.
- The built-in learner management system allows you to monitor the following information: book title, Xreading Level, words read, percentage of book read, read time, reading speed, listen time, quiz grade and book rating.

Although Xreading is a relatively new website, it has already been used in research studies. Cote and Milliner (2015) found that whilst 21% of their 95-student sample read less than 10'000 words in a 15-week semester, not meeting their word count target, there were seemingly various benefits to using Xreading on mobile devices. For example, there was an increase in books read compared with the previous paper-based ER semester. Whilst online books are certainly not about to replace traditional ones, it seems that university students are not averse to them and may prefer them.

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In more general research, an interesting finding in Jeon and Day's (2016) ER meta-analysis was that web-based stories seem to have a higher effect on reading proficiency than traditional books. However, this is a point which may be contested by some, as internet-based texts are still a relatively new medium.

The Students

A total of twelve students took part in the online graded reader activity. One class of five 1st year students, and one class of six 2nd year students and one 4th year student enrolled in a Communicative English elective course at Himeji Dokkyo University. The course involves three 90-minute lessons per week over two 15-week semesters.

Classes are grouped by Eiken level, and these students were at either the pre-2 level or level 3. The students' L1 was Japanese and they all completed their education in the Japanese school system, with no study abroad period for longer than three weeks. Only three out of twelve students reported attending English classes outside of school.

The Xreading Activity

The Xreading activity involved a weekly process of selecting an online graded reader, reading it and having a ten-minute discussion about it with the same group of three to five students. The project ran for six weeks in the 2018 spring semester. For three of the weeks, each student individually selected and read a book independently of their group. For the remaining three weeks, the group chose a book together, and read the same book, in both cases there was a group discussion. The discussion aspect of the activity was particularly aligned with the pedagogical aims of the Communicative English course.

Graded Reader Selection

The online graded readers were selected in class, which was conducted in a computer lab. During the self-selection weeks, students generally scrolled through the library silently and chose a book they were interested in. When the readers were selected by groups, the time and depth of discussion varied. Some group

members were happy to leave the choosing to others, but sometimes, particularly in the latter stages of the project, the groups had in depth discussions about which book they wanted to read. They considered factors such as past hits and misses in the areas of book series, reading level and book length and other preferences, such as British English over American English.

To match the learners' level, I restricted the graded reader library to Xreading Levels 1 - 6 (51-800 headwords) and a maximum of 5000 words in each story. Non-fiction books were not made available due to concerns they could be less likely to stimulate discussion.

Reading the books

Every week, immediately after selection, the students were given ten minutes to read their book in class, and they were required to read the rest of the book by the following week for homework. Students were advised they could read the book while listening to the audio if they wished.

In general, the book completion rate was quite high, with seven out of twelve students reading 100% of their books in all of the six weeks. Of the remaining five students, three read 100% of their book on five out of six weeks, and the remaining two students only read the whole book three or four times.

The motivation of students varied, and some may have deliberately chosen shorter books, to reduce, or eliminate their homework. Other students seemed to like the challenge of longer books. There was a clear split between the 1st year and 2nd year class:

Table 1: 6 Week Total - Words Read and Reading Time

Average Student	Total Words Read	Total Reading time
1st Year	7572	01:40:03
2nd Year	11493	03:27:12

The average 2nd year student read almost 4000 words more than the average 1st year student. In addition, they read for an extra one hour and 47 minutes over

the six-week period. The average weekly amount of time spent reading in addition to the weekly ten minutes in-class reading time was only six minutes and 41 seconds for the 1st year class and 24 minutes and 32 seconds for the 2nd year class.

Discussion

The nature of the discussion was influenced by the selection type. During self-selected weeks, much of the discussion entailed explaining the plot of the story to other group members. In group selected weeks, students were able to immediately start discussing themes, plot and characters from the book. Following reflections from pre-project reading discussions, a PowerPoint slide with prompt questions and example answers was projected to help stimulate discussion and students were given five minutes to prepare before each discussion. The questions were as follows:

Every week:

How did you feel about the story?

Self-selection weeks:

What happened in the story? (every time)

What interesting foreign culture did you find in the story? (Week 1)

Which group member would most enjoy the story? (Week 3)

If you were making a movie of the book, who would you cast? (Week 5)

Group-selection weeks:

Which character was the most interesting? Why? (Week 2)

What probably happened next in the story? (Week 4)

How could you change the ending to be more interesting? (Week 6)

The prompt questions were made available to help students, but they were not compulsory. In general, the 1st year students' discussions were rigidly structured around these questions, and the 2nd year students were more likely to allow the conversation to go in other directions.

Future implementation of an online graded reader activity

Three things I would keep the same

1. Group discussions

Reading a graded reader provided stimulus for the relatively low-level students in this project to have a ten-minute discussion, something they may struggle to do with other stimuli. Of the 18 observed discussions (six for each of the three groups), 13 ended on time at ten minutes, and on five occasions, the students needed to be stopped, as their discussion overran.

2. Listen and read option

One especially useful feature of Xreading is the audio option, particularly that you can control the speed. Several learners commented that this was useful, allowing them to listen and read at their own pace.

3. Reading in class

The amount of time spent reading for homework was very minimal. Whilst, this may increase if students were required to read longer books, I believe the in class reading time was useful. It set an example of a good amount of time to sit and read an L2 graded reader in one sitting, ten minutes. It also ensured that less motivated students would at least read part of the book, enabling them to participate in discussions.

Three things I would change

1. Individual selection only

The individually selected weeks allowed learners to retell stories. This can be an overlooked area in language curriculums, which are often based on question/answer exchanges, when in reality, conversation often revolves around storytelling, even if it is trivial episodes that occur in the speakers' own life. Linking the retelling done in post ER discussions to storytelling in conversation could be interesting.

2. Change discussion groups

In this project, the groups were kept the same each week, to keep the number of variables to a minimum. I think it is probably more beneficial to rotate

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groups, so students can hear different opinions and recommendations from a variety of people.

3. Assessment - word target

The assessment for this project was 10% of the students' final grade for the Communicative English course, which was awarded for participation, specifically for reading one book a week and taking part in the discussions. Their grade was reduced in weeks they did not read a book or take part in the discussion. They were also encouraged to take part in Xreading over the summer, with a purist view that students would appreciate the benefits of ER and read to improve their English ability. Unfortunately, none of the students read any books over the summer

A word target may be motivating and encourage more reading if Xreading were to be included in the future curriculum. Koby (2017), in a program including Xreading, set a target for students of 415'000 words over a two-year period and expected it to be achieved by most students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to discuss issues that naturally emerged when implementing an online graded reader activity in a Communicative English class. For the most part these learners seemed to be engaged in the activity, particularly in the post ER discussions. There were also clear advantages to using Xreading over traditional books. Specifically, the option of audio and controlling listening speed, the instant access to a sizeable library and the monitoring capabilities made available with the learner management system. I hope my reflections might encourage other instructors to try a similar activity in their classrooms.

Those thinking about using online graded readers may consider introducing a word target to encourage more reading, particularly if it is linked to course assessment. They might also consider exploring the possibility of linking story retelling-based discussions with story-based conversation. The cooperative learning activities described by Jacobs and Gallo (2002) are a valuable resource for instructors interested in trying post-ER discussions in their classrooms.

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Abstract

Whilst Extensive Reading (ER) is a well-established research field, online graded readers are a relatively new medium. The current manuscript provides an account of how an online graded reader activity was introduced at the university level to students who had limited experience of reading graded readers in English. The students chose, read and had a ten-minute discussion about a graded reader every week for a six-week period. They alternated between weeks where the book was selected individually or as a group.

The time students spent reading out of class was minimal, a weekly average of six minutes and 41 seconds for 1st year students and 24 minutes and 32 seconds for 2nd year students. However, students were able to engage in a weekly discussion for at least ten minutes every week.

Three main positives are identified to be carried forward if a similar project were to be implemented in the future; the option to listen and read at your own pace, reading during class time and having group discussions about graded readers, which particularly met the pedagogical aims of the communicative English class. Three main alterations are also suggested; only allowing students to choose books individually, changing discussion groups every week and giving students word count targets, which should be included in their assessment.