

Teacher 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 on 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 ubiquitous 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 a website known as Xreading (www.xreading.com), which offers hundreds of graded readers in digital format. This study examines teacher perceptions of the platform. A total of nine teachers participated in the study, including the authors of the paper, and the results appear to indicate that teachers feel extensive reading in general is a worthwhile activity but difficult to implement in this context. Results also show that teachers feel the online platform, Xreading, needs to improve in several areas before providing a significant advantage over physical books.

Key Words: extensive reading, teacher perceptions, Xreading

1. Introduction

This study examines teachers' perceptions of extensive reading and specifically the online reading platform, Xreading. The paper continues the analysis of Howarth and Bollen (2019) which focused on students' use of the platform and online reading in general.

The original study (2019) analyzed the survey responses of 730 second-year students who had used Xreading throughout the first semester of the 2018-

19 academic year. This study analyzes the survey responses of the nine teachers who taught those students, and focuses on general impressions of extensive reading and more specifically on the benefits or drawbacks of using Xreading as part of an extensive reading program.

Since 2011, extensive reading has been a component of the English curriculum at Sojo University. The course has generally been supported by MReader, a program that allows teachers to monitor and direct students' reading, and utilized the over-1700 physical books currently available in the Self-Access Learning Center (SALC). Approaches

*Senior Assistant Professor, Sojo University

to the implementation of extensive reading have varied over that time. Some teachers have assigned reading primarily as homework, others have incorporated in-class reading and discussions, while others have focused on reading aloud and book reports. The amount of reading required has also varied as have the means and weight of assessments.

In 2017, following an Xreading presentation at the university, and discussions with teachers, the decision was made to incorporate Xreading into the extensive reading program for the following academic year. In April 2018 all second-year students were required to purchase a subscription to the Xreading website (www.xreading.com). Apart from a semester-long pilot study, conducted by three teachers in 2014, this was the first time that Xreading had been used within the university. Students were asked to respond to a survey which focused on their perceptions of Xreading, an analysis of which can be found in Howarth and Bollen (2019). Teacher survey responses were collected at the end of the first semester of the 2018-19 academic year, and will be discussed here.

2. Research Questions and Methodology

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. *What are teachers' perceptions of extensive reading as a learning tool?*
2. *What are teachers' perceptions of the online extensive reading platform, Xreading?*

To answer these questions, teachers involved in the teaching and development of the second-year curriculum during the 2018-19 academic year were asked to complete a short survey at the end of the second semester. The survey was delivered via SurveyMonkey and responses remained anonymous. All nine teachers involved in the second-year curriculum completed the survey, including the authors of this paper. The survey consisted of a mix

of open-ended (n=6) and multiple choice items (n=5). It was hoped that by keeping the number of items to a minimum, teachers would be inclined to provide more in-depth responses.

3. Results

The first two questions of the survey aimed to elicit teachers' perceptions of extensive reading in general, and whether they believe it is a useful learning tool for students at Sojo University. The most common theme that emerged from the responses was that extensive reading is seen as a worthwhile approach to learning a language, but difficult to implement properly with the students we have in our program. Reasons why this is the case will now be discussed.

Teachers perceive there to be two main issues that prevent extensive reading from being successful at Sojo: (1) students' low motivation, and (2) low proficiency. In terms of motivation, one response in particular summarized the teachers' feelings, "Only the truly, truly dedicated students will benefit from a course of extensive reading". Low motivation is quite typical in university settings in Japan, especially at institutions which do not offer English as a major but require all students to study English for at least two years (Hayashi, 2005; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). Research shows that for extensive reading to be effective a large amount of reading needs to be undertaken, with some studies arguing for a minimum of 300,000 words over the course of a semester (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukuda, 2010; Beglar, Hunt, & Kite, 2012). This amount of reading necessitates that students be committed to reading consistently, ideally daily, over a long period of time. Also, for it to be considered true extensive reading the motivation of the learner should be intrinsic, as opposed to reading simply to obtain credit for a class or assignment (Day & Bamford, 2002). It appears that teachers feel as though this kind of student is not representative of the typical student at Sojo

University, thereby making it difficult to get students to do the necessary amount of reading.

The other reason why, according to teachers' perceptions, extensive reading is difficult to implement properly at Sojo is the generally low proficiency of students. A number of teachers commented that extensive reading worked for some of the higher-level students in their classes, but was not appropriate for the majority. It is interesting to note, however, that one of the principles of extensive reading is that students should read texts that are well below their reading ability to promote a fluent, easy, and hopefully, enjoyable reading experience. Therefore, to say that extensive reading only works for higher level students may be misleading, unless "higher level" students refers to the more diligent or motivated. Another explanation for the number of comments about finding more success with higher level students is that the quantity and/or quality of readers intended for very low level learners is limited. Indeed, a couple teachers noted that too many of the books available on Xreading were "boring" or "better suited to younger learners". Whether or not the perception matches the reality, it is clear that teachers feel extensive reading is difficult to properly implement given the lack of motivation and low proficiency that many of the students display.

The remaining questions on the survey focused on teachers' perceptions of the online platform, Xreading, that students used to access books. There were two areas that were explored. First, teachers were asked to comment on the usefulness of Xreading as a means for students to access graded readers, as opposed to simply using physical books as was done in the past. Secondly, teachers were asked to provide feedback on the usefulness of the learner management system (LMS) embedded within Xreading. These two areas of focus will now be discussed separately.

In terms of Xreading as a vehicle for delivering

extensive reading, the overall impression that teachers appeared to have is that there is great potential for the service, however, in its current form it fails to hold a significant advantage over physical books. Several teachers noted the advantage a platform like Xreading offers in terms of accessibility. Students can read a book wherever and whenever they want, assuming the website is working properly. However, a number of issues with the website were raised by teachers, the main one being difficulty to connect to, or access, the site. Many teachers mentioned that, particularly during the orientation process at the beginning of the semester, the Xreading site would not load properly, or quickly enough, on the tablets that were being used in class. Teachers found themselves spending a lot of the class time trying to address technical issues that students had with the website. The administrator at Xreading was quite responsive to teachers' frustrations at the time, and assured us that it would not be a long-term problem. We were told that perhaps the servers were not able to cope with the number of users all trying to access the site at the same time, and that connectivity would improve after the initial set-up. That appeared to be the case, as connectivity issues to the website seemed to dissipate later in the semester. However, for many of the teachers, the problems that arose during the initial set-up were their first experience with Xreading, and this appeared to have left a lasting negative impression. As shown in Table 1, six out of the nine instructors who responded to the survey either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "Getting students signed up and logged in to Xreading was a simple process", and no one strongly agreed. Clearly, this was a significant frustration teachers had with the website. Interestingly, as reported in Howarth and Bollen (2019), students were more likely to agree with this statement.

Table 1.
Getting students signed up and logged in to Xreading was a simple process.

	Number of responses	Percent
Strongly agree	0	0%
Agree	2	22.2%
Neither agree or disagree	1	11.1%
Disagree	3	33.3%
Strongly Disagree	3	33.3%

Connectivity issues were not the only problems raised by teachers in the survey. Some of the teachers felt that the interface was confusing and not very intuitive. Searching for, and “checking out” books from the virtual library was not straightforward and took some time to figure out. A number of comments were also made regarding the difficulty of reading books on a small screen like a smartphone which, in effect, negates the benefit of accessibility that Xreading offers. The inability to quickly flip through a book before choosing to read it, as one would with a physical book, was also noted by a teacher. Lastly, it appears that teachers would like the service to operate more like an actual e-reader, such as Amazon’s Kindle. Functions such as bookmarking, and tapping unknown words to reveal a definition, were both mentioned in comments.

While most of the comments seemed to be critical of the website, it is worth noting a few positive points of feedback the service received. Again, many of the teachers acknowledged the potential that Xreading has, especially in terms of giving students access to hundreds of books at their fingertips. If connectivity improves, it appears most of the teachers would make use of the site. There were also several positive comments regarding the ability to listen to the books while reading. One of the features that Xreading offers is that almost every book is accompanied by an audio file of the text. The benefits of listening-while-reading are widely reported (Brown, Waring, & Donkaewbua, 2008; Chang, 2009), and comments in the survey indicate that this

is an important feature that Xreading offers.

In addition to asking teachers their opinions of Xreading as an access point for graded readers, the survey also asked teachers to reflect on their experience with the LMS embedded within Xreading. Teachers are able to track students’ progress in Xreading, which collects data on each student’s reading speed, number of words read, total amount of time spent reading, and a host of other data points. This, of course, is valuable information for the teacher, as it holds students accountable for the work they are supposed to be doing. It allowed teachers not only to counsel students who were falling behind on their reading assignments, but also to give positive feedback and encouragement to students who were making the most use of the site. As Tables 2 and 3 show, this feature of the website appeared to be somewhat useful to teachers, but not overwhelmingly so.

Table 2.
The learner management system on Xreading was useful.

	Number of responses	Percent
Strongly agree	1	11.1%
Agree	3	33.3%
Neither agree or disagree	3	33.3%
Disagree	1	11.1%
Strongly Disagree	1	11.1%

Table 3.
The Xreading data was useful.

	Number of responses	Percent
Strongly agree	1	11.1%
Agree	4	44.4%
Neither agree or disagree	2	22.2%
Disagree	2	22.2%
Strongly Disagree	0	0%

Teachers were asked to comment on their responses to these two items, and the most common theme that emerged here was a lack of confidence in

the accuracy of the data. It appears as though teachers recognized the potential value of the data that Xreading collects, but also “we don’t know how reliable the data is” and “I’m unconvinced I can trust some data sets”. There are a few possible explanations for this skepticism.

First, the skepticism possibly stems from some quirks in the way Xreading calculates whether a book has been finished. After reading a book, students must take and pass a quiz in order for the book to be considered “finished”. If the student forgets to take the quiz, or doesn’t pass it, then the book is not considered “finished” and no data are recorded. Occasionally, students approached their teacher claiming to have read a book and passed the quiz, but for some reason it was not recognized by the Xreading system. Also, there are times when a student will start reading a book, get distracted for some time, and then go back and finish the book later in the day, and the data will say that it took, for example 17 hours, to read a book with 500 words in it. For the data to be accurate it is important for a student to “check out” a book, start reading it uninterrupted, finish it, and then immediately take and pass the quiz connected to the book, ideally on the first try. However, this is not always how the process eventuates, which led to a mistrust of the data amongst teachers.

As a result of the mostly negative views that teachers held toward their initial experience with Xreading, both in terms of its ability to smoothly deliver graded readers to students and also accurately record useful data, a decision was taken to discontinue using Xreading as part of the extensive reading program, in the 2019/20 academic year. Table 4 reveals the lack of support for the continued use of Xreading in its current form.

Table 4.

I want to continue using Xreading in my classes.

	Number of responses	Percent
Strongly agree	0	0%
Agree	2	22.2%
Neither agree or disagree	1	11.1%
Disagree	2	22.2%
Strongly Disagree	4	44.4%

Again, it is important to note that teachers recognize the potential that Xreading offers. However, improvements in the interface, the quantity and quality of books, functionality, and accuracy of data delivered via the learner management system need to be made before they would be willing to try Xreading again.

4. Conclusion

Based on the responses to the survey items in this study, there are two main conclusions that can be drawn. First, while teachers believe that extensive reading is a worthwhile activity for students to pursue as one possible tool that can be employed in their language studies, there is some strong opposition in terms of making it a central part of the curriculum. Considering the general low levels of motivation and proficiency for studying English amongst students at Sojo, teachers believe it is very difficult to implement it properly.

The second conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the online platform Xreading does not, in its current state, provide a significant advantage over the use of paper-based books. Teachers recognize the potential that such a service offers, especially regarding the access to graded readers that it provides to students. However, due to technical and other issues as described above, there is a strong sentiment that physical books may be a better option in the immediate future until improvements are made to the website. This is true of the learner management system embedded within Xreading as well. Teachers

recognize the value of the data that Xreading attempts to collect, especially in the way it holds students accountable for their work, but a lack of trust and confidence in the data limits its usefulness at the moment. If the shortcomings raised in this study are addressed then it is possible that Xreading could be part of the curriculum at Sojo University at some point in the future.

Sakai, H., & Kikuchi, K. (2009). An analysis of demotivators in the EFL classroom. *System*, 37(1), 57-69.

References

Beglar, D., Hunt, A., & Kite, Y. (2012). The effect of pleasure reading on Japanese university EFL learners' reading rates. *Language Learning*, 62, 665-703. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9922.2011.00651.x

Brown, R., Waring, R., & Donkaewbua, S. (2008). Incidental vocabulary acquisition from reading, reading-while-listening, and listening to stories. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 20(2), 136-163.

Chang, A. C. S. (2009). Gains to L2 listeners from reading while listening vs. listening only in comprehending short stories. *System*, 37(4), 652-663.

Day, R., & Bamford, J. (2002). Top ten principles for teaching extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14(2), 136-141.

Hayashi, H. (2005). Identifying different motivational transition of Japanese ESL learners using cluster analysis: Self-determination perspectives. *JACET Bulletin* 41, 1-17.

Howarth, M., & Bollen, D. (2019). Student perceptions of an online extensive reading platform. *The Bulletin of Sojo University* 44, 145-151.

Nishizawa, H., Yoshioka, T., & Fukuda, M. (2010). The impact of a 4-year extensive reading program. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT Conference Proceedings* (pp. 632-640). Tokyo, Japan: JALT.