Using a learning management system to enhance an extensive reading program

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Abstract. The Extensive Reading (ER) approach to second language acquisition is increasingly one of the methods of choice amongst English as a Foreign Language (EFL) educators around the world. This method requires learners to read a large volume of easily comprehensible text, and teachers to track and manage their students' progress in some manner. There are several different ways to monitor and assess student compliance with, and participation in an ER program, and this paper highlights the features and benefits of the world's only purpose-built Learning Management System (LMS) and integrated digital library designed specifically for ER students and practitioners. Participants (n=146) in the ER program for which the LMS is employed are first- and second-year Japanese university students majoring in English literature or linguistics. This ER program currently requires all participants to read a minimum of 540,000 words over the two years. An efficient method of managing this somewhat challenging requirement is provided by the LMS described in the following article.

Keywords: extensive reading, LMS, EFL.

1. Introduction

ER has, in recent years, garnered the increasing interest and attention of language educators worldwide (Yamashita, 2015). Japan, particularly, has seen a proliferation of ER programs at the tertiary level, and in recent years even the secondary school level. The benefits of ER, including overall second language acquisition, expanded vocabulary, increased reading speed, and elevated scores on achievement tests such as the Test Of English for International Communication (TOEIC) have been well documented (Nishizawa, Yoshioka, & Fukada, 2010).

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As part of a curriculum overhaul in the English Department at Miyagi Gakuin Women's University (MGU) that came into effect in April 2016, ER was assigned a central role in the new program. MGU is a private 4-year liberal arts university in northern Japan, with a total of 3000 students enrolled in a number of undergraduate programs. All first- and second-year students (n=79 and n=67, respectively) in the English Studies Department are required to participate in the ER program. ER performance is typically measured in terms of the number of books, pages, or, most frequently, words that students read in a given period of time. ER reading volume targets or requirements vary widely amongst the many different ER programs available, often depending on the amount of in-class and out-of-class time teachers expect their students to spend reading. Successful completion of the ER program at MGU is mandatory for graduation, and one weekly class of 90 minutes for the first four 15-week semesters, is allocated as class time for ER. With this in mind, it was decided that somewhat ambitious reading volume targets would be set throughout each of the semesters. Now in its second year, the program currently requires students to read 90,000, 120,000, 150,000, and 180,000 words in semester one through four respectively. To track and manage what will amount to at least 540,000, and for some students certainly exceed 1,000,000 words of reading, it was decided that an LMS would be employed.

Investigation by our program administrator into the availability of suitable LMS options revealed that there were only two ready-made platforms specifically designed for ER program management. The first, *MReader*, is a fee-free platform available to ER practitioners worldwide that includes a bank of short comprehension quizzes for nearly 6,000 books (often referred to as *graded readers*) common to many ER programs. The second (fee-bearing) option, *Xreading*, includes all of the features of *MReader*, which allows students to read from a physical library of graded readers of up to 6,000 different titles, with the additional benefit of a digital library of over 800 graded reader e-books which students can access anywhere, anytime. Because of the large volume of reading students are required to complete in the MGU program, access to books was a key issue for our program administrator, so *Xreading* was selected to best serve our students' needs.

2. Features of Xreading

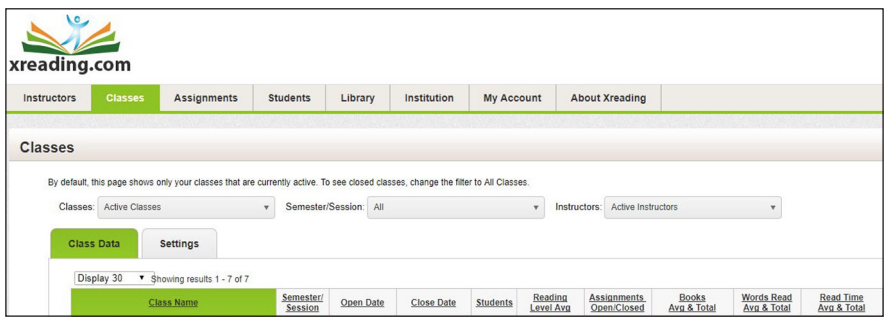
2.1. Reading achievement of paper books: the tests

Assessing students engaged in ER is a topic of some debate (Brierley, 2009). However, as this particular program is situated in a university context, and

credit towards graduation is earned in the ER classes, it was felt that some level of verification beyond student self-reporting, which is common in many ER programs, was essential for our program. With this in mind, it was decided that the short comprehension quizzes provided by *Mreader* would be employed. While not necessarily perfect (Brierley, 2009), with a passing score set at just 50%, these multiple-choice quizzes afford at least some level of validity that the students have, in fact, read the books they are claiming.

Beginning in April of 2016, *Xreading* (Figure 1) incorporated the *Mreader* bank of over 6,000 graded reader quizzes into its platform. Actual quiz data is still situated within the *Mreader* system, and when students search on *Xreading* for available book titles, the data is retrieved from the *Mreader* site. Quiz items vary in their construction, and include multiple choice, true or false, and chronological sequencing of events included in the books. Each quiz contains ten questions, but draws from a pool of up to 25 items, thus each time a quiz is created it varies from the last, therefore reducing the chances of students cheating on the quizzes. Conveniently, these quizzes can be taken on mobile devices as well as desktop computers.

Figure 1. Screenshot of Xreading teacher's dashboard



2.2. The digital library

One of the fundamental objectives of this particular ER program is to provide our students with freedom and choice. While we do have over 5,000 printed books in our extensive reading library, the fact that there are only single copies of most of the titles, coupled with the limited time that students have access to the books, were viewed as potential impediments to students' reading. The digital library of over 800 titles provided by *Xreading* solves this problem of access. Students can simultaneously read the same title, and read as many of the e-books as they find interesting.

Instructors have the ability to limit access to the digital library by student, class reading level, genre, or individual title. For the MGU ER program, we have allowed all first-year students access to approximately 250 titles at the lower reading level, while second-year students can access the lower 500 titles in the first semester, and have unrestricted access to the entire collection in semester. This is in keeping with our graduated ER program structure described in detail in Koby (2017).

2.3. Data collection for the administrator

Xreading provides instructors with a wealth of data about their students' reading. Data related to books, student activity, and test scores, are sortable within seconds and readily available and downloadable in .csv format. This data can be used for assessment, analysis, and identifying possible attempts by students to cheat. Same-title books entered by multiple students can be identified in seconds, which can help instructors in managing and reducing potentially dishonest behavior amongst the students. In addition, individual student reading level and volume can be monitored, and lack of participation can be easily identified. Our particular ER program guidelines suggest that students should read regularly (ideally daily), and this activity can be monitored on an instructor's mobile device or computer in seconds.

3. Using Xreading in the ER classroom

Students involved in MGU's ER program use *Xreading* thousands of times each semester. While both first- and second-year students have demonstrated a clear preference for paper books, there is a significant difference that has been observed between the two grades. Of the 9,350 books read in first semester by first-year students, just 1,193 (12.75%) were e-books. However, second-year students read 31.95% of their books in the digital format. While the exact reasons for this shift have yet to be firmly identified, it is clear that the choice of *Xreading* has been beneficial overall to contributing to our students' success.

Results from the first semester of 2017 indicate that overall reading volume met the targets set by the instructors. First-year students, who are required to read a minimum of 90,000 words to pass, read an average of 148,500 words. In comparison, second-year students (who are on an older incarnation of the ER program), were required to read 115,000 words to pass and ended up reading an average of 149,100 words. This would have been much more difficult to monitor and manage without *Xreading* in use.

4. Conclusions

Xreading is a learning management partner that allows ER instructors to administer their ER programs efficiently and effectively. The ER program briefly described in this article relies heavily on the use of the *Xreading* LMS, and it is believed that through the use of *Xreading*, students' motivation and participation were substantially enhanced.

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