L2 Extensive reading: online graded readers or 'old school' paperbacks?

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Abstract. The purpose of this pilot study was to investigate (1) students' interest in reading English books, (2) students' interest in using an online Virtual Library (VL), and (3) students' experiences and preferences relating to the implementation of an online VL within an Academic English Program (AEP). First-year students (N=136) from a public university in southwest Japan participated in this study. The preliminary results provide a deeper understanding of student interest, experiences, and preferences relating to the implementation of a VL within an AEP.

Keywords: CALL, academic English program, extensive reading, virtual library.

1.   Introduction

Research related to the positive impact of Extensive Reading (ER) has highlighted several benefits for English as a Second Language (ESL) students including: improved reading confidence, reading fluency, reading speed, grammar understanding, and vocabulary acquisition (Krashen, 2009; Nakanishi, 2015; Waring, 2006; Yamashita, 2013). ER research indicates that it improves not only reading proficiency, but also English language proficiency (Clarity, 2007). However, the costs of providing students with an extensive range of English Graded Readers (GRs) can prove difficult. Fortunately, with advances in online technologies and the increased adoption of mobile devices, accessibility to English GRs has greatly improved.

VL now, for instance, provides students with remote access to a large variety of GRs via electronic devices. VL offers a flexible option for language programs

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looking to implement ER. Advances in technology, more specifically educational technologies, have given increased access to English language resources to students. One such resource is Xreading® (www.xreading.com). Xreading is an online GR resource and learning management system designed to promote ER among English students.

This pilot study was the first phase in the potential integration of a VL into an Academic Reading (AR) course. To better understand student interest, experiences, and preferences relating to the implementation of a VL, the authors focused on the following question.

> What is L2 students' interest in reading English books, interest in using an online VL, and their experiences and preferences relating to the implementation of a VL within an AEP course?

2.   Method

2.1.   Participants

First-year students (N=136) from a public university in southwest Japan participated in this study. Participants were non-English majors and came from three of the university faculties (environmental science, food and health sciences, and international liberal arts). All participants were studying within a coordinated compulsory first-year AEP course. The AR component has 64 classes per academic year with two 90-minute classes per week.

2.2.   Instrument

The student online surveys focused on investigating three areas, including (1) students' interest in reading English books, (2) students' interest in reading online books, and (3) students' experiences and preferences relating to the implementation of an online VL within an AEP course.

2.3.   Procedure

Eight AR classes of approximately 15 students per class participated. Four classes (N=67) were given access to the VL (Xreading.com) for a period of eight weeks.

These four classes were then split into two groups (Groups A and B) depending on the AR tasks the participants would be asked to complete. The remaining four classes completed AR classes as per the program guidelines. Students with access to the VL were assigned AR tasks to complete weekly. Table 1 indicates the schedule, GRs, reader level, and reading tasks that were assigned for Groups A and B. The reading tasks were assigned as homework during the fourth quarter of the academic year in Week 1, Week 3, Week 5, and Week 7. Students were provided with AR reflective worksheets (see Figure 1) that they were asked to complete before the following class. In the following class, students were asked to share their completed reflective worksheets with peers. The main difference relates to the tasks assigned to each group. Group A had reflective worksheets to complete and also class presentations in Weeks 4 and 8 that were linked to the GR they had read. Group B only had to complete the reflective worksheets and share readings with peers.

Table 1.   AR schedule, GRs, level, and task (Group A: N=33; Group B: N=34)

Q4 Week	Group	Procedure	GR Options	Level/ Headwords	Task
1	A	Assign Reading 1	Access to *Amazing Young Sports People*	4/400 headwords	Class Presentation 3 minutes in Week 4
	B				No Class Presentation
2	A & B	Complete Worksheet 1			Reflective Worksheet
3	A & B	Assign Reading 2	Access to 66 GRs	5/600 headwords	GR Discussion AR Class
4	A & B	Complete Worksheet 2			Reflective Worksheet
5	A	Assign Reading 3	Access to 20 GRs	5/395-450 headwords	Class Presentation 5 minutes in Week 8
	B				No Class Presentation
6	6	Complete Worksheet 3			Reflective Worksheet
7	7	Assign Task 4	Access to 169 GRs	6-7 600-1,000 headwords	GR Discussion AR Class
8	A & B	Complete Worksheet 4			Reflective Worksheet

Figure 1.   AR reflective worksheet

ACADEMIC READING (AR) REFLECTIVE WORKSHEET Q4 2019

Student Name:	Book Title:		Class:	Week:

Write a **brief summary** about the book you read:

The **most interesting part** of this book is:	The **most interesting person** in this book is:	I **liked** this book because:

The **least interesting part** of this book is:	The **least interesting person** in this book is:	I **didn't like** this book because:

3.   Results and discussion

Preliminary analysis of the data collected indicates students' interest, experiences, and preferences (see Table 2).

- **Students' interest in reading English books**: Students noted reading English books would help them study English, learn English at university, and help in future professions.

- **Students' interest in using an online VL**: Students preferred reading English paperback books to VL online books.

- **Students' experiences and preferences relating to the implementation of a VL**: Students were divided on whether they wanted to use Xreading in the future.

It should be noted that only 42% of students that had access to the VL during this study would like to use it in the future. Students that preferred English

paperback books, noted technical issues and the increased screen time associated with reading books online. Another concern was the subscription cost associated with the VL system. Below is a snapshot of student responses relating to their paperback or online preferences.

Table 2. Quantitative data snapshot: student responses to the core research questions

Item	Question	Response	Percentage
1	Do you think reading English books will help you study English?	Yes	99%
2	Do you think reading English books will help you learn at university?	Yes	86%
3	Do you think reading English books will help you in future professions?	Yes	81%
4	Do you prefer reading English paperback books?	Yes	72%
5	Do you prefer reading English online books?	Yes	28%
6	Do you want to use Xreading in the future?	Yes	42%

Qualitative data: examples of student responses to 'why' they preferred English paperback books.

"Your eyes get tired when reading online books".

"I don't feel like reading online. Reading with a paper book gives you a sense of accomplishment".

"I can't concentrate on reading online for a long time".

"It's easy to skip a sentence or go back and re-read a page in a book".

"I don't want to keep looking at the glowing screen because my eyes are bad and because it's easy to read at a pace of my own with a paper book".

Qualitative data: examples of student responses to 'why' they preferred English online books.

"You can read it anytime, anywhere".

"You can read anywhere on your mobile phone without having to carry a book".

"If you read an English book online, you can quickly look up unknown words on the same device".

"You can read when you have free time without carrying the book around".

"There are many kinds of books, and you can choose a book about your interest".

Based on the preliminary findings of this study the following recommendations could be suggested:

- provide students with workshops on VL functionality to develop user confidence and engagement prior to implementation;

- provide students with self-care guidance to limit potential eye strain relating to increased screen time; and

- provide students with post-reading tasks linked to the assigned GRs to ensure students are able to identify the purpose of the readings and language learning benefits.

4.   Conclusion

This pilot study provided useful insights relating to student interest, experiences, and preferences relating to the implementation of a VL within an AEP course. The data collected in this study suggests that students do see the benefits provided by reading English books. However, it seems that most students are not comfortable reading English books online. They are also cautious about increasing screen time and therefore are reluctant to embrace the VL within an AEP. It is hoped that through student workshops on VL functionality/benefits, self-care guidance to manage increased screen time and the use of specific AR tasks students will become more comfortable using a VL in the future.

5.   Acknowledgments

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