

# Piloting M-Reader in University Communication and Literature EFL Courses: Results and Issues

大学の EFL コースにおける Mreader の活用の試み：分析と課題

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## Introduction

To boost the reading abilities of learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) courses in Japan, more and more teachers in various educational institutions in Japan are guiding their students to engage in extensive reading (ER). A good extensive reading program is one in which students are provided with a variety of reading material to choose from that is easy for them to read, and in which students are encouraged to read more difficult material over time, at a faster rate (Day & Bamford, 2002). However, implementing such a program can be logistically difficult and time-consuming for teachers, who should ensure that students are being held accountable to meet reading goals established in the course. One solution to this dilemma is the use of M-Reader, a user-friendly website which allows students and teachers to track students' reading progress.

This paper reports on the initial use of M-Reader in EFL university-level literature and communication courses at a private university in Western Japan during the 2017 summer semester. After establishing justification for the use of ER and M-Reader as a tool for measuring students' reading progress, this paper describes the implementation of the program, students' reactions to ER and M-Reader, and the motivational and academic results of the program. This is followed by a reflection of the program, and suggestions for how to improve it. It is hoped that the information provided in this report will be of use to future institutions which are interested in establishing their own ER programs and which are considering implementing the use of M-Reader themselves.

## Background

### Extensive Reading

Essentially, extensive reading involves L2 learners reading a large and varied amount of L2 material while consciously pushing themselves to read as quickly as they can while also comprehending the text and enjoying the reading experience. Day and Bamford (2002) created a list of ten principles which are generally agreed upon by second language acquisition (SLA) researchers and educators as constituting ER: 1) reading material should be easy; 2) learners should have access to a wide range of topics; 3) learners should autonomously choose their own material; 4) learners read as much as possible; 5) reading

should be pleasurable; 6) reading should be intrinsically rewarding; 7) learners should push themselves to read quickly; 8) reading is individual and silent; 9) teachers should guide students; and 10) teachers should act as reading models. This differs from intensive reading, which involves learners reading L2 material well above their level, usually with the aim of translating the material or focusing explicitly on language through identifying grammar functions or mining for unknown vocabulary.

Other researchers have tried to define what constitutes appropriate ER reading material. If material is to be “easy” then it should be comprehensible. Krashen (1982) described this input as  $i+1$ , where  $i$  is a learner’s current L2 language ability, and  $+1$  is any L2 input that is just above that level. Nation (2009) suggests that ER material meets the  $i+1$  criteria if readers can understand 95–to-98 percent of the reading material without assistance. To meet this need, a number of publishers, including Cambridge, Penguin, and Oxford have produced series of graded readers for learners studying English as their second language. By utilizing English vocabulary frequency lists, graded readers tell simplified versions of stories ranging from classical literature, biographies, and film novelizations, which are made up almost entirely of only the most commonly encountered English vocabulary. These make them a prime resource for potential EFL extensive reading programs.

A wide variety of benefits from ER have been investigated and reported. In terms of ESL/EFL learners’ English ability, ER has been shown to lead to increased reading rates and proficiency (Iwahori, 2008; Kusanagi, 2008; Masuhara, Kimura, Fukada, & Takeuchi, 1996; Taguchi, Takayasu-Maass, & Gorsuch, 2004), increased writing proficiency (Janopoulos, 1986; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Tsang, 1996), vocabulary gains (Horst, 2005; Pitts, White, & Krashen, 1989), and increased general language proficiency (Bell, 2001; Iwahori, 2008; Sheu, 2003). ER has also been shown to increase learners’ motivation to learn English (Nishino, 2007; Takase, 2003) as well as their attitude towards English (Asraf & Ahmad, 2003).

Based on Day and Bamford’s ER principles mentioned above, instructors who wish to implement an ER program with their learners must ensure that reading material is available, must model the act of reading, and must “guide students.” At the university in which this study was conducted an assortment of graded readers were available for students to check out at the university library (for institutions without reading material, the Extensive Reading Foundation website, [www.erfoundation.org](http://www.erfoundation.org), offers potential solutions). The second obstacle, then, comes with guiding students. For the purposes of this study, the researchers operationalized this task to include informing the students about what extensive reading is, and leading students to achieve reading goals. For this purpose, the researchers decided upon the use of M-Reader.

### **M-Reader**

The M-Reader website ([www.mreader.org](http://www.mreader.org)) was created with the aid of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) and Kyoto Sangyo University. It is a browser-based version of the Moodle “Reader” module, and the interface is designed to make it easy for

students to use, and for instructors to keep track of students' progress. Through M-Reader, students have access to multiple choice quizzes for over 6,000 graded readers as of 2017. Students can take and pass these quizzes as proof that they have read the reader in question.

Once teachers create classes on M-Reader and after students register, students can immediately see a visual representation (a colored bar) of their reading progress, which tells students how many words they have read based on how many quizzes they have passed. Teachers are presented with a list of their registered students, along with how many words each student has read (based on the number of quizzes which they have successfully passed). Teachers also have access to a number of other features. For example, teachers can establish how many quizzes students are allowed to take daily (the default setting is "1") to discourage learners from attempting to complete all of their reading at the end of a term. Teachers can also prevent learners from reading high-level graded readers until they have passed quizzes for a sufficient amount of low-level graded readers first.

### **Motivation for Using M-Reader**

There are a number of reasons for instructors who are implementing an ER program to use M-Reader. Perhaps one of the largest draws is that M-Reader is free. Through it, teachers can observe the progress of a large number of learners with relatively little hassle. In the case of the university where this study was conducted, an Extensive Reading course had already been taught for a number of years before M-Reader was used. However, while that course focused on ER as a classroom activity, M-Reader was seen as a way of adding extensive reading components to other EFL courses (namely literature and communication courses) by encouraging students to engage in ER outside of class. This goal here was to encourage students to become more autonomous learners, a goal which M-Reader was seen as a means of facilitating.

### **Research Questions**

In this study, the researchers investigated the overall effects of adding an ER homework component to three different kinds of EFL courses, as well as the effectiveness of using M-Reader as an ER management tool. To this end, three research questions were asked:

1. How much ER material (i.e., graded readers) did learners read throughout the term?
2. What were learners' attitudes towards extensive reading homework?
3. What were learners' attitudes towards M-Reader?

### **Institution and Learners**

This study was conducted at a private university in Osaka, Japan. Learners were first and second-year students, either majoring in education, English, or international business. Learners were divided into four classes: two 2nd-year English Literature classes ( $n = 91$ ), one 2<sup>nd</sup>-year Communication Seminar course ( $n = 36$ ), and one 1st-year Extensive Reading course ( $n = 25$ ). In general, students in the English Literature

courses were of a slightly higher level of proficiency than students in the Basic English Communication and Extensive Reading courses.

### Method

Before the start of the term, two administrators from the university contacted the M-Reader administrator at Kyoto Sangyo University via e-mail to ask for permission to register. Permission was promptly granted, and the applying administrators established the general settings for all university courses using M-Reader. These settings included establishing the username registration pattern (one letter plus seven digits for every username), establishing the amount of allowed quiz attempts per day, and applying a penalty for learners who fail a number of comprehension quizzes in a row. The administrators then contacted teachers who demonstrated an interest in using the website, registered those teachers, and allowed those teachers to set reading goals (measures by numbers of words read) for their learners.

The three teachers who participated in this study agreed to a set of standardized procedures. In all classes (the two literature classes, the communication English class, and the ER class), teachers explained the concept of extensive reading to the learners. They then introduced learners to M-Reader and helped them to register. With the learners the teachers decided upon a word goal for the class, and set the final lesson (the 15<sup>th</sup> week of the course) as the deadline. In the literature class, the teacher also allotted at least ten minutes in most lessons for sustained silent reading (SSR), and modeled reading for the students.

However, teachers also reported some variation in how they implemented M-Reader into their courses. For example, learners in the literature classes took a walk with their teacher to the university library, where they were shown the graded readers and instructed to check one out from the library that day. There was also variation in how often students were reminded of their M-Reader assignment. In the literature class, learners were shown a roster of their reading scores at the beginning of each lesson and encouraged to continue. Learners in the Basic Communication course were shown scores periodically in class, while learners in the Extensive Reading course were only given periodic verbal reminders. Teachers also varied in the kinds of ER-focused activities they used in their classes. In the literature classes, learners were required to write and present three book reports, each based on one graded reader of their choosing. In the ER class, learners were required to write short summaries only of graded readers which were deemed required reading for the course. They were also required to keep a vocabulary journal of any new vocabulary they encountered while reading graded readers. In the Basic Communication course, learners were not required to discuss their extensive reading texts explicitly in class. It was solely designed as a homework assignment.

### Instrument

All learners ( $n = 152$ ) were administered a 16-item voluntary survey during the last lesson of the

term (see Appendix). The items were written by native English-speaking teachers and subsequently were translated by Japanese teachers of English. Responses to each item were rated using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (“I don’t think so at all,” 全くそう思わない) to 5 (“I really think so,” 強く思う). Some of the questions were asked to attain background information, such as item 1 (“Which class are you in?” どのクラスに所属していますか。) and items 7 (“I like to read stories in Japanese,” 日本語で物語を読むのが好きだ。) and 8 (“I like to read stories in English,” 英語で物語を読むのが好きだ.). However, others were designed to address at least one of each of the research questions mentioned above.

## Results

### Amount of Material Read

In the English Literature courses, the majority of students (86%) either met or surpassed the reading goal of 75,000 words. Eight students read more than half of the goal amount, four read less, and two read nothing. In the Basic Communication course, with a reading goal of 25,000 words, 12 learners met or surpassed the goal, ten read more than half of the goal amount, eight read less than half, and six read no books. In the Extensive Reading course, with a reading goal of 80,000 words, no students reached the goal, six read more than half of the goal number, nine did not reach the goal, and five reported not knowing that a goal existed. The majority of learners reported reading at least one graded reader per week (63.1%).

### Learners’ Attitudes Towards Extensive Reading Homework

Learners were split about whether or not they thought their class’s reading goal was appropriate. However, more than half (51.9%) reported a desire to read more English material due to their graded reading homework, while 63.6% reported that they felt their reading comprehension ability had increased, and 55.6% felt that their reading speed had increased. Exactly 50% of students responded that they were glad that they had participated in extensive reading program using M-Reader, while 28.4% were indecisive, and 21.6% reported a somewhat negative response. The majority of learners also responded that reaching their reading goal was at least as difficult as they had thought it would be.

### Learners’ Attitudes Towards M-Reader

The majority (51.2%) of learners thought that the M-Reader quiz questions were fair. However, a larger number of learners (58.2%) found the website somewhat difficult to register. Most students (65.5%) found it relatively easy to locate the quizzes for their books through M-Reader’s quiz search engine. As reported earlier, exactly 50% of the students responded that they were glad that they had participated in an extensive reading program using M-Reader.

## Discussion

Although varied, the results of the survey indicated that M-Reader was a beneficial tool to ensure students were engaging in comprehensible English input that was of particular interest to them. Nation (2009) stated that learners need to be exposed to copious amounts of meaning-focused input, which he described as input that is meaningful and of interest to the learners and appropriate to their language level with elements that facilitate language proficiency development. In other words, 98% of the material is familiar to the learners, whereas the remaining two percent is potential to be taken as intake. Graded readers through an ER program are excellent means to ensure this process.

The results, overall, indicated that the learners engaged in the ER program and utilized M-Reader effectively. Learners who actively used M-Reader also associated positive gains with ER such as increases in reading speed and reading comprehension. This sentiment mirrors that of Beglar, Hunt, and Kite (2012) who discovered that learners who engaged in pleasure reading of simplified texts (graded readers) showed significant gains in reading rates. Although our study did not empirically assess whether students' reading rates actually increased, it would be safe to assume that given the proper amount of time and sufficient amount of reading, learners would improve in reading rates. Nishizawa, Yoshioka, and Fukada (2010) stated that learners need to read at least 300,000 English words in order to read more difficult texts such as those found in the TOEIC test with relative ease. None of our classes set a goal as high as that, as it would have been burdensome for the learner to do so in one semester.

Analyzing the results by class showed that the learners from the English Literature classes outperformed the learners from both the ER class and the Communication Seminar class. Not only did more of the English literature learners complete the goal, but many also surpassed the goal by a great amount and were constantly reading. As to why this could be so, one explanation could be that the learners from the Literature class were more motivated to read in English. These learners tend to be more academically inclined and focused than their English or international business major peers. It could be possible that the learners in the ER class are less inclined to read in English. Further inspection of the results indicated that the majority of the students in this class were positive in responding to reading in Japanese and either positively inclined or apathetic towards reading in English; results which were relatively on-par with the English literature class. However, these findings are disputed with the results from the students in the Communication Seminar course as they indicated that they enjoyed reading in Japanese and English even though they did not overly engage in M-Reader.

The only conclusion as to why engagement in M-Reader and results in reading goals were so varied was the implementation of M-Reader by the course instructors. Each of the instructors used M-Reader differently to the other instructors. The instructor for the Literature classes was more persistent in its use and since it was a literature class, considered the M-Reader component an essential element of the class. The Communication Seminar instructor, on the other hand, used M-Reader as a small component since this class's aim was to foster development of the productive macro-skill, speaking, and used M-Reader as part of their homework assessment. The concerning issue lied with the ER class. Since this was an

exclusive ER class, student participation and achievement rates should have been high, yet they were not. This leads us to the conclusion that the instructor either was not very incessant on the use of M-Reader, was too lax in monitoring students' progress in the program, or did not have the confidence or know-how to continually monitor the students' progress.

Upon looking at learners' open-ended comments about their overall impressions or suggestions to improve the program, learners' responses varied. One of the positive comments referred to the learner's (education major) interest in using M-Reader in their future career ("I want to use M-Reader for my own classes"). This was an unexpected response, but highlighted that some of the participants saw the pedagogical value of ER and M-Reader. Some of the positive comments ranged from "I will do my best to get to the reading goal," "I want to read more books," "I want to do M-Reader even after this class is over," "I want the reading goal to be set at 150,000 words," and "I want to use this (M-Reader) for my own personal study." These comments suggest that students found this as a motivation tool to get them to read more. Based on Bandura's (1995) theory of perceived self-efficacy, if a learner is exposed to mastery experiences, their intrinsic motivation orientation will increase, as they receive gains in confidence. The learner feels that they can actually accomplish something and are motivated to challenge themselves. ER has this potential since many Japanese learners experience reading in English only through intensive reading exercises, which do little to increase second language (L2) reading self-efficacy. The more a learner succeeds in reading an L2 text, the more confident and motivated they are to challenge themselves further. The negative comments were comparatively fewer than the positive comments, but included such sentiments as, "I don't use," "the password system was annoying," and "I don't hope to use this again." Even though there were some disheartened users of M-Reader, it was enlightening to see that there were some frustrations with how to use the system. As for those who merely expressed their disdain with M-Reader, it would have been nice if these learners elucidated their reasons for saying so.

It can be said without M-Reader or an alternative to an online system like M-Reader, there is no true valid approach to ascertain whether learners have actually read the books or not. Book reports can be satisfactory as a way to validate if students have read any books by learners displaying their ability to synthesize the material and give their opinions about the books that they read. However, students could easily summarize their findings by reading the blurb of the book, copying a classmate's book report, or making up their book report entirely without having read the book. Also, there is no accurate way to gauge how much a student has read via this approach. M-Reader guarantees that students are reading something appropriate to their level, and the reading goal indicator on M-Reader gives learners a concrete and comprehensible grasp of how much they have read or how much more they need to read to reach their prescribed reading goal.

### Limitations

As this was the first time using M-Reader at this particular institution, there were definitely fallbacks

in its implementation. The most serious fault was the disparity of M-Reader's use between the three classes, particularly that of the ER class. For that class, the instructor would have benefitted from increased training and monitoring from the program administrators. Also, if the instructors had collaborated as in how to implement M-Reader, there would have most likely been less variance in the system's usage.

Another fallback is the lack of student participation in using M-Reader. Even though the literature courses excelled in using M-Reader, the other classes did not, and that was a detriment to the learners' academic progress. One possible reason for this is having set one major reading goal for the semester. Perhaps some instructors and students either felt overwhelmed with the goal or, the more likely scenario, they neglected the goal and tried to make up for lost reading time towards the end of the semester which ended up being physically impossible. A possible solution to this is breaking the reading goal into smaller, more frequent, and more manageable goals throughout the semester.

Another limitation is learners taking quizzes without having read the book by relying on their world knowledge. A prime example is learners taking quizzes for graded readers based on films. Learners might take the test and pass it just from watching the film. If this is the case, it creates an issue for validity in M-Reader. A possible solution is to eliminate the selection of film-based graded readers from the M-Reader server.

A final limitation to this study was the lack of any empirical analysis. Two questions asked about learners' perceived increases in reading comprehension and reading rates. However, these were not quantitatively investigated, so we only have the subjective accounts from the learners. Conducting pre-tests and post-tests and investigating increases in reading comprehension and reading speeds would validate the use of M-Reader as a viable approach for learners to receive comprehensible L2 input.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of implementing the M-Reader system into a group of diverse English courses. We sought to determine whether M-Reader was a useful tool in encouraging learners to read plenty of English books appropriate to their level. We investigated, through M-Reader, how much learners would read, and, through an online survey, we wanted to ascertain how learners evaluated the use of online quizzes and their general attitudes in using M-Reader. Results showed that even though achievement rates between classes varied, a substantial number of students engaged in M-Reader and found it a motivating tool in getting them to read copious amounts of L2 input that is interesting to them and promotes autonomous learning by allowing them to choose what they read. Overall, comments from the learners indicated that they were happy using M-Reader, and that it encouraged them to challenge themselves to read more in English. Not without its imperfections, we could say that the implementation of M-Reader into various English courses has been a boon for learners' English reading proficiency and reading motivation, and we recommend its continued and expanded use in more English courses.

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## Appendix: Extensive Reading Survey

1. Which class do you belong to?

(どのクラスに所属していますか。)

a) Teacher A   b) Teacher B   c) Teacher C

(101; 96%)   (25; 15.4%)   (36; 22.2%)

2. How far did you meet your reading goal?

(語数の目標はどれくらい達成しましたか。)

- a) I passed my goal. (63; 38.9%)
- b) I achieved my goal. (41; 25.3%)
- c) I achieved half of my goal. (24; 14.8%)
- d) I did not achieve half of my goal. (21; 13%)
- e) I did not read any books. (8; 5%)
- f) I did not know that there was a reading goal. (5; 3%)

3. The reading goal was appropriate.

(語数の目標は適切だった。)

- a) I really think so. (21; 13%)
- b) I think so. (59; 36.4%)
- c) I can't decide. (46; 28.4%)
- d) I don't think so. (26; 16.1%)
- e) I don't think so at all. (7; 4.3%)
- f) No response. (3; 1.9%)

4. The MReader quiz questions were fair.

(MReader のクイズの質問は適切だった。)

- a) I really think so. (17; 10.5%)
- b) I think so. (66; 40.7%)
- c) I can't decide. (32; 19.8%)
- d) I don't think so. (28; 17.3%)
- e) I don't think so at all. (10; 6.2%)
- f) No response. (9; 5.6%)

5. It was easy to register to MReader.

(MReader に登録するのは簡単だった。)

- a) I really think so. (25; 15.4%)
- b) I think so. (39; 24.1%)
- c) I can't decide. (37; 22.9%)
- d) I don't think so. (37; 22.9%)
- e) I don't think so at all. (20; 12.4%)
- f) No response. (4; 2.5%)

6. I could easily find the quizzes for the books which I read through MReader.

(読んだ本に関する Mreader のクイズがどこにあるのかを見つけるのは簡単だった。)

- a) I really think so. (23; 14.2%)
- b) I think so. (51; 31.5%)
- c) I can't decide. (32; 19.8%)
- d) I don't think so. (38; 23.5%)
- e) I don't think so at all. (12; 7.4%)
- f) No response. (6; 3.7%)

7. I like to read stories in Japanese.  
(日本語で物語を読むのが好きだ。)
- a) I really think so. (66; 40.7%)
  - b) I think so. (56; 34.6%)
  - c) I can't decide. (20; 12.6%)
  - d) I don't think so. (11; 6.79%)
  - e) I don't think so at all. (9; 5.6%)
8. I like to read stories in English.  
(英語で物語を読むのが好きだ。)
- a) I really think so. (21; 13%)
  - b) I think so. (62; 38.3%)
  - c) I can't decide. (46; 28.4%)
  - d) I don't think so. (24; 14.8%)
  - e) I don't think so at all. (9; 5.6%)
9. This semester, I easily found graded readers that were appropriate to my level.  
(今学期は、自分のレベルに合った graded readers を簡単に見つけられた。)
- a. I really think so. (25; 15.4%)
  - b. I think so. (70; 43.2%)
  - c. I can't decide. (49; 30.3%)
  - d. I don't think so. (13; 8%)
  - e. I don't think so at all. (5; 3.1%)
10. This semester, I frequently read English (for example, one graded reader each week).  
(今学期は、頻繁に英語を読んだ (例えば、毎週 graded reader を1冊)。)
- a) I really think so. (40; 24.7%)
  - b) I think so. (62; 38.3%)
  - c) I can't decide. (37; 22.8%)
  - d) I don't think so. (16; 9.9%)
  - e) I don't think so at all. (7; 4.32%)
11. I want to read more English books now because I read many graded readers for this class.  
(このクラスのために多くの graded readers を読んだので、今はもっと英語を読みたい。)
- a) I really think so. (26; 16.1%)
  - b) I think so. (58; 35.8%)
  - c) I can't decide. (43; 26.5%)
  - d) I don't think so. (25; 15.4%)
  - e) I don't think so at all. (3; 1.9%)
  - f) No response. (7; 4.3%)
12. I think my reading speed has increased because I read many graded readers for this class.  
(このクラスのために多くの graded readers を読んだので、自分の読むスピードが上がったと思う。)
- a) I really think so. (20; 12.4%)

- b) I think so. (70; 43.2%)
  - c) I can't decide. (47; 29%)
  - d) I don't think so. (16; 9.9%)
  - e) I don't think so at all. (2; 1.2%)
  - f) No response. (7; 4.3%)
13. I think my reading comprehension ability has increased because I read many graded readers for this class.  
(このクラスのために多くの graded readers を読んだので、自分の読解力が上がったと思う。)
- a. I really think so. (22; 13.6%)
  - b. I think so. (81; 50%)
  - c. I can't decide. (37; 22.8%)
  - d. I don't think so. (11; 6.8%)
  - e. I don't think so at all. (4; 2.5%)
  - f. No response. (7; 4.3%)
14. It was easier to reach the reading goal than I thought it would be.  
(語数の目標を達成するのは思っていたよりも簡単だった。)
- a) I really think so. (15; 9.3%)
  - b) I think so. (23; 14.2%)
  - c) I can't decide. (31; 19.1%)
  - d) I don't think so. (48; 29.6%)
  - e) I don't think so at all. (28; 17.3%)
  - f) I didn't read much. (12; 7.4%)
  - g) I didn't know that there was a goal. (5; 3.1%)
15. I am glad that I read many graded readers and used MReader.  
(多くの graded readers を読み、MReader を使えたことが嬉しい。)
- a) I really think so. (24; 14.81%)
  - b) I think so. (57; 35.2%)
  - c) I can't decide. (46; 28.4%)
  - d) I don't think so. (26; 16.1%)
  - e) I don't think so at all. (9; 5.6%)
16. If you used MReader and graded readers again, what would you want to do differently?  
(もし MReader と graded readers をもう一度使う機会があれば、どのような (どのように異なる) 使い方をしたいですか。)