# The Lessons Learned from the Digital Extensive Reading Trial

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## Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the feasibility of a digital extensive reading programme and the attitude of English-major college students toward the programme. The research was conducted in the department of English in a professional training college in Tokyo, which never offered compulsory extensive reading classes before. There were 20 participants, none of which had any experience of an extensive reading programme, or with a digital library before. The participants had one month of digital reading experience with Xreading. The research result revealed that the introduction of the digital library itself did not encourage students to establish English reading habits. The sheer amount of material to read online actually discouraged some students from reading at all. The concerns and the implications from the findings are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused abrupt changes in schools and they are not only in the teaching but also the book loan system. In the teacher's room of the college where the researcher works, more than a hundred graded reader books for EFL (English as a foreign language) learners were available for students over the years. However, as well as other higher education institutes, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 resulted in closing the campus itself and the book

loan service was suspended. Even after the students and the teachers came back to the campus in 2021, the practice of the preventive measure against infection was still strictly required. The book loan service did not resume: the lack of staff and budget resulted in postponing the restart of the book loan service. The concerns about the decline in the amount of students' reading was expressed among the teachers. This resulted in the college considering the introduction of an online reading platform and providing a sufficient reading environment to the students.

However, a digital reading platform was not an easy cure all. Based on the experience of online teaching under the pandemic, the teachers there were concerned about the existence of the two types of students struggling: the students with lower motivation and the students being left behind from e-learning. For the latter type of students especially, through the online teaching experience over the past two years, teachers realized that some students were facing extra stress due to the lack of digital experience, connectivity, and literacy. This problem was unsolved even after the end of the online lesson periods. Most classes continued using online assignments and apps in the classroom, after returning to in person teaching at the college. Considering students' career paths after graduation, it seemed to be inevitable for the college to provide an environment that students can talk and share about their problems and that helps students be more familiar with digital devices and online content. Therefore, the college decided to offer a one-month extensive reading programme with an online reading environment before officially launching an extensive reading programme as a full-year course so that they can explore students' perceptions and attitudes toward it.

## 2. Previous Literature

### 2.1 Online Reading in the Digital Library: Xreading

Xreading is a "virtual library" which offers over 1200 graded readers from over 20 publishers[1] and has a learning management system. Once students get their own online account, they have unlimited access to the books stored in the digital library and all the information regarding their activity including the title of books they clicked, the time they spent reading them, plus the results of any vocabulary quizzes with new words in the books are all automatically recorded. These features help students and teachers to keep track of student reading progress. The results from a lot of research about extensive reading with Xreading are available from Japanese EFL classrooms.

The factors which make digital books in a digital library a better option are not just the coronavirus pandemic and the need to sanitize paper books. As Cote and Milliner (2015) pointed out, the budget, the operation, and the management were the main concerns for practicing an extensive reading programme in the college. Among digital reading platforms, Xreading seems to be one of the most popular choices in Japan. Through a textbook retailer, the college was able to register the participants and each account cost 660 yen per month. Considering the fact that a typical printed graded reader book costs 700 - 1,000+ yen each, Xreading can be recognized as good value from the school's point of view.

### 2.2 Students' Perspectives toward Extensive Reading

The students in the college had different attitudes toward learning English and their proficiency levels were also diverse, ranging from A1 to C1 on the CEFR. Therefore, any extensive reading programme at the college should be conducted to help not just motivated and higher level students but also students

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[1] As of August 2022, Xreading is not for individual use and only educational institutions can register their students. https://xreading.com/ (accessed 2022.10.05)

in the very basic level or with low motivation as well. Mason and Krashen (1997) conducted the experiment focusing on reluctant EFL learners and they found that extensive reading helped their EFL learning positively.

The studies that point to extensive reading being the key to improve English proficiency have been widely discussed, however, not all academics and researchers agree about how extensive reading affects EFL learners in the Japanese education system. Mason and Krashen (1997), Milliner (2017), and Ryan (2019) conducted the research of extensive reading and its effect on EFL students in Japanese higher education, but their research had different conclusions. Mason and Krashen (1997) revealed the positive influence of extensive reading on EFL students' performances while Milliner (2017) and Ryan (2019) did not find the significant influence on participants' TOEIC score improvement. In his paper, Bieri (2015) showed students' feelings and attitudes about a similar extensive reading website called M-reader, an online quiz site for extensive reading books. Focusing on the operating side, his research also examined the students' responses toward M-reader and concluded the students showed positive attitudes towards it. Although the academic conclusions about how effective extensive reading is for students, is rather mixed, it could be said that one of the key elements of a successful extensive reading programme is to understand their students' needs and attitudes first.

## 2.3 Research Questions

The following research questions were raised.

1. Does the introduction of the digital library itself, encourage, or even discourage students to engage in reading?
2. Are there any features that make students stop online extensive reading?

# 3. Method

The research was conducted in the English department of a 2-year professional training college in Tokyo in August 2022.

## 3.1 Participants

There were 20 participants of this research, all students at the college. Table 1 shows each student's background information.

Table 1. Participants' Background Information

| Student No. | School Year | Gender | Proficiency Level (TOEIC) | Age group | First Language | Plan after graduation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| #01 | 1 | M | 105 | 18-20 | Japanese | University transfer |
| #02 | 1 | M | 235 | 21-30 | Japanese | Others |
| #03 | 1 | M | 350 | 18-20 | Japanese | University transfer |
| #04 | 1 | M | 315 | 18-20 | Japanese | University transfer |
| #05 | 1 | M | 320 | 21-30 | Japanese | Getting a full-time job |
| #06 | 1 | M | 415 | 21-30 | Japanese | University transfer |
| #07 | 1 | F | 450 | 21-30 | Japanese | Getting a full-time job |
| #08 | 1 | M | 515 | 60+ | Japanese | Others |
| #09 | 1 | F | 530 | 18-20 | Japanese | University transfer |
| #10 | 2 | F | 530 | 18-20 | Japanese | Study abroad |
| #11 | 1 | F | 550 | 21-30 | Japanese | University transfer |
| #12 | 1 | F | 575 | 18-20 | Japanese | University transfer |
| #13 | 1 | M | 660 | 21-30 | Vietnamese | Getting a full-time Job |
| #14 | 1 | M | 735 | 60+ | Japanese | Others |
| #15 | 2 | F | 790 | 21-30 | Japanese | Getting a full-time Job |
| #16 | 1 | F | 810 | 30-40 | Japanese | Getting a full-time Job |
| #17 | 2 | F | 830 | 21-30 | Chinese | Others |
| #18 | 1 | F | 860 | 18-20 | Tagalog | Getting a full-time Job |
| #19 | 1 | F | 880 | 18-20 | Japanese | Getting a full-time Job |
| #20 | 2 | M | 925 | 18-20 | Japanese | Study abroad |

The participants were selected based on their age, proficiency level, educational background, gender and career plan. This is to represent every kind

of student at the college as much as possible and to ensure that the extensive reading programme, which is planned to begin in 2023, will benefit all students in this college. The participants were told that this one month project did not affect their school grades at all but teachers were able to see each student's reading record.

Under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the college delivered all the classes online in both the first and the second semesters in 2020. In the 2021 school year from April 2021 to March 2022, based on the number of infections and the State of Emergency in Tokyo, students experienced both classroom and online lessons. However, the online lessons were implemented on a limited basis and were only a few weeks in May, September, and January in 2022. That means that the 1st year students were students who have not experienced any online classes in the college.

## 3.2  Procedure

Before the project started, the overview of the project was announced to all the participants. They were invited to join in the seminar and learned what Xreading was and how to use it. Soon after the seminar, pre-study questionnaire was conducted. Questionnaires were conducted before and after the extensive reading programme started. The pre-study questionnaire contained the questions about the frequency of student reading, their reading preferences and digital device use. After the pre-study questionnaire, each students' account information and the guide of how to use Xreading were sent to each student. The email was sent on August 1st in 2022 and students were able to log in and read unlimited amounts of material until August 31st in 2022. Although the research period was in the summer break, students were told that they were able to ask questions regarding the Xreading to the school. All the participants were asked to answer the post-study questionnaire in September. The post-study questionnaire also contained the open-ended questions too, in the hope of understanding how the students felt.

# 4. Results

## 4.1 Pre-study Questionnaire

According to the pre-study questionnaire, none of the participants joined an extensive reading programme before. There were only two students who previously read graded readers. Regarding the question about the attitudes toward reading, eight out of 20 said they did not have the habit of reading in English at all: two said they did not like reading in English, five answered that they did not know what to read, and one pointed out that reading in English is difficult to afford financially. Table 2 shows their answers of what they care the most when they choose the book to read. The questions related to their digital experiences showed that the participants were all experienced smartphone users. The questionnaire before the research showed 100% of the participants used smartphones every day. Among 20 students, five answered they used PC almost every day and four answered they used the tablet almost every day.

Table *2*. Things the participants put importance on when they choose the book

NB: multiple answers. (n=20)

| | |
|---|---|
| Topics and contents of the book are suitable for me. | 14 |
| The book can bring the positive impact on my skills and grades | 8 |
| The book can bring the positive impact on my career paths | 3 |
| There are a number of pictures and photos in the book. | 2 |
| The length of the book is sutiable for me. | 1 |
| Others | 0 |

## 4.2 One-month Reading Experience with Xreading

Five students asked questions during the research period. Three students visited the researcher in the school to ask how to use Xreading with their own smartphones. Two students called and explained how busy they were with other assignments, and they felt it was too difficult to find time for extensive reading. Table 3 shows the number of the books students read and finished, and the time

they spent during the research period. When we focus on the active participants, we notice a bimodal pattern. One group is from the students whose TOEIC L&R scores were 320 to 530, the other group is from TOEIC L&R 735 to 880. Student #11 confessed she never logged in to the Xreading but the other 19 students answered that they logged into their own accounts at least once. As the table below shows, the majority of the participants did not read at all or spent less than five minutes in one month.

Table *3*.  Xreading Usage by Each Participant during The Research Period

| Student No. | School Year | Gender | Proficiency Level (TOEIC) | Age group | No. of books read | Books Finished | Reading time |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| #01 | 1 | M | 105 | 18-20 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| #02 | 1 | M | 235 | 21-30 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| #03 | 1 | M | 350 | 18-20 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| #04 | 1 | M | 315 | 18-20 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| #05 | 1 | M | 320 | 21-30 | 2 | 1 | 0:03:20 |
| #06 | 1 | M | 415 | 21-30 | 1 | 1 | 0:00:40 |
| #07 | 1 | F | 450 | 21-30 | 3 | 1 | 0:08:10 |
| #08 | 1 | M | 515 | 60+ | 6 | 3 | 0:39:10 |
| #09 | 1 | F | 530 | 18-20 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| #10 | 2 | F | 530 | 18-20 | 1 | 0 | 0:01:40 |
| #11 | 1 | F | 550 | 21-30 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| #12 | 1 | F | 575 | 18-20 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| #13 | 1 | M | 660 | 21-30 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| #14 | 1 | M | 735 | 60+ | 4 | 2 | 1:46:20 |
| #15 | 2 | F | 790 | 21-30 | 10 | 7 | 8:37:00 |
| #16 | 1 | F | 810 | 30-40 | 3 | 1 | 0:23:50 |
| #17 | 2 | F | 830 | 21-30 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| #18 | 1 | F | 860 | 18-20 | 16 | 15 | 2:18:00 |
| #19 | 1 | F | 880 | 18-20 | 3 | 0 | 0:06:20 |
| #20 | 2 | M | 925 | 18-20 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

## 4.3  Post-study Questionnaire

Based on the comments, most students were positive about the large collection of books in the digital library. One student commented "there were

about 1-15 levels, so it was easy to find the right book for me," and similar comments were recognized. However, another type of comments also frequently came up from the students. That being, the extensive book collection caused difficulty such as "I had to spend so much effort to check the contents of the book and select it by myself." One student commented, "I would like a list with an outline, even if it is just one line." 10 students who logged in but never read any books answered the reason and their answers were categorized into three: the difficulty of operation (answered by three students), lack of time because of other English assignments (four students), and the difficulty of selecting books (three students). As for the difficulty of operation, one student said, "If the college is going to install the system, I would like to see how it is operated first." There was also a comment written by a student, "it was not compulsory so I was not motivated to do it." No students mentioned its influence on their career plans.

## 5.  Discussion

The results suggest that introducing a digital library itself does not motivate students to participate in extensive reading programmes.  Indeed, it seems that some of the features of a digital library can even cause problems for students trying to participate. There seems to be two possible reasons why this is the case. These two reasons may be the possible answers to the research questions above. Firstly, is the digitization of all the features and records. The second reason is the rich book collection.

With regards to the features of a digital library, one of the most remarkable benefits for teachers of using Xreading is the ability to quickly visualize the number of books, reading time, and the result of the comprehension quizzes. Whatever the student does on Xreading is logged and recorded. This data quickly shows which students are autonomous readers and which are not so that teachers can easily find out if the students are participating in the programme.

With this data, the extensive reading programme can be managed effectively in the future, were it to be introduced. However, there are also drawbacks to its rich features too. For example, six students raised the difficulty of using Xreading which resulted in them avoiding reading books there despite the fact that a seminar was held in advance and the participants were free to ask questions during the research period. The information that Xreading provides teachers can only come from the students being monitored, which may have led students to be reluctant to use Xreading.

Another possible answer to the second research question is the wide range of book collection. The rich book collection was one of the attractive features of Xreading. However, the collection was too huge for some participants to find the books they are interested in. Instead of being grateful with the choice on offer, students found it difficult to know what to choose, or if their choice was a valid one. In the pre-study questionnaire, 14 participants out of 20 answered that they chose books based on the topics and the contents. On the other hand, in the post-study questionnaire, there were comments pointing out the negative side of the large number of book collections, enough to drown the students. There were comments of requesting a recommended reading list to guide their reading. This suggestion should be considered when the college actually starts the extensive reading programme.

The findings above suggest that the features which are considered as the advantages of digitalization by teachers can sometimes cause another problem for students. Besides the research questions, this research also revealed that most students were not naturally autonomous readers. This time the study found that a considerable effort to make students read the first book is required although Zhou and Day (2021) concluded that reading graded readers online improved students' attitude toward reading itself. More and more research of online extensive reading should be done focusing on students' attitude, motivation, and the scaffolding by teachers.

## 6. Conclusion

Xreading, the digital library, allows EFL teachers to see their students' reading effort as data. That will help teachers provide more effective support for students. However, this research also revealed that giving students unlimited reading opportunities does not turn students to autonomous readers. The results of this research showed a common problem not only for the college, but also for any professional colleges with an English department. However, it is also true that the duration of the research and the number of participants were limited. Although there was previous literature which focused on the effect on the extensive reading to the improvement of EFL learners' proficiency level, more and more research, especially focusing on the relations of students' autonomy and digital libraries, and how teachers should use the data for the feedback will be needed.

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