Student Assessment Preferences in an ER Program

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Reference Data:

Assessing student progress in an extensive reading (ER) program can be a challenge. Popular assessment choices include assigning book reports or administering quizzes such as those available on the M-Reader website. This paper presents results of a survey in which 1st- and 2nd-year Japanese university students were asked which method they preferred. We begin with a brief overview of ER and an explanation of M-Reader. Next, we offer a description of the participants and the structure of the survey. We then provide detailed results of the survey in which a majority of students indicated a preference for M-Reader. The results also show that students who preferred M-Reader took more quizzes than students who choose book reports, and they also had a higher opinion of the pleasure of reading and the usefulness of graded readers. In the conclusion, we discuss ways of encouraging students to use M-Reader as the preferable assessment method.

　学生のエクステンシブ・リーディング（ER）の進度を評価することは難しい。良く用いられている評価方法は、読んだ本についてレポートを　書かせたり（Book　reports）、M-Readerを用いて本の内容に関するクイズを解かせることである。本論文では、1, 2年生の日本の大学生に対して行ったアンケート調査において、彼らがどちらの方法を好むかについて報告する。まず、ERについての簡単な説明とM-Readerについての説明をする。次のセクションでは、アンケートの参加者とアンケートの構造 について説明する。そして、アンケートの詳しい結果について説明し、過半数の学 生がM-Readerを好むことを説明する。その結果は、M-Readerを好む学生たちは、Book　reportsを選んだ学生よりも、より多くのクイズを解き、課題の本に対して、より楽しく学び、有益であるという意見を持っていることが明らかになった。結論においては、学生たちに対して、より好ましい評価方法であるM-Readerを使うように促す方法について議論する。

EXTENSIVE READING (ER) is a method of language learning that involves students reading a large amount of easy-to-read and enjoyable books in order to develop reading speed and fluency. Learners who engage in ER read graded readers, which are specially prepared books (both fiction and nonfiction) containing grammar and vocabulary that match the learners' current level of proficiency. Learners generally do not enjoy reading original, unsimplified books because there are too many unknown words. Hirsh and Nation (1992) suggested that reading becomes more pleasurable when 97-98% of the words are known. At this threshold, learners do not need to use a dictionary to understand what they are reading and can therefore concentrate on the content of the text. By using graded readers, learners develop vocabulary by guessing the meanings of unknown words from context (Wodinsky & Nation, 1988). Recent research (e.g., Lee, 2006) has shown that students who read extensively learn more vocabulary than students who do not. However, in some cases students are not reading enough to show such vocabulary gains (Murata, 2006). A modest

goal is to have students read 40,000 to 50,000 words in a semester (Campbell, 2012).

One of the main problems faced by teachers, especially if they have hundreds of students, is checking whether students have done the required amount of reading. Assigning book reports is one option, but many teachers simply do not have time to read hundreds of book reports each semester. Additionally, book reports may impose too much of a burden on students when one of the main goals of any extensive reading program is to encourage students to read with minimal accountability (Krashen, 1993). Moreover, book reports can be easily faked. For example, students can simply copy the blurb on the back of the book and scan the text for a few additional details. One solution to these problems that is becoming popular is to use online quizzes to check whether students have read the books and to keep track of the number of words that they have read. The MoodleReader, an online repository of quizzes that cover thousands of popular graded readers, is one such tool (Robb & Kano, 2010). Students take timed multiple-choice quizzes related to the books they are reading. The purpose of the quizzes is simply to check whether the students have read the book, so the quizzes are not meant to test comprehension or recall of minor details. When students pass a quiz, the number of words in the book is added to the students' totals. Students and teachers have access to these word counts, and they can keep track of the progress. The project described in this paper uses a simplified version of MoodleReader called M-Reader (mreader.org), which is meant to be easier for administrators, teachers, and students to use (Robb, 2013).

This paper describes the results of a survey in which Japanese university students were asked about their opinions of graded readers and ER, how they felt about the M-Reader website, and whether they preferred taking online quizzes through M-Reader or doing book reports as a way to show that they had done their assigned reading. Previous research (Hill, 2013) has found that students strongly prefer quizzes to other methods of assessment. In the fol-lowing sections we will describe the survey and provide an analysis of the results in more detail.

Research Design

Participants

Participants were 104 freshman and sophomore university students majoring in English at a small women's university in Western Japan during the 2013-2014 school year. Of the 104 participants, 96 students responded to survey questions about M-Reader, with the remaining eight leaving their responses blank because they had not used the website during the second semester. Nearly all of the participants had previous experience with M-Reader during the first semester. Extensive Reading was a component of the required Reading & Writing course for English majors. The students' reading goal was between 40,000 and 80,000 words per semester, depending on their level of English proficiency.

Materials & Methods

We administered a survey to gain insight into the students' opinions of ER as a learning method and their evaluation of M-Reader as an assessment tool. The survey was completed at the end of the school year in January 2014. We used a paper-based questionnaire in Japanese (see Appendix for a translated English version), which the students completed in approximately 10 minutes during class and returned to us via their teachers. The survey was not completely anonymous, as students were asked to provide their university ID numbers. This was done mainly to help us keep track of the data and to sort the students into groups. The survey included 32 individual items: 1 question about the number of books students took quizzes on; 12 six-point Likert scale items to gauge student opinions of the pleasure of reading and the usefulness of the reading materials; 4 semantic differential items concerning the difficulty of the books; 5 semantic differential items about the M-Reader

website; 1 multiple-choice question regarding students' assessment preferences (M-Reader versus book reports); and 1 multi-select multiple choice question with 8 options for each choice (M-Reader or book reports) regarding students' reasons for their preferences. These reasons were based on student responses to an open-ended question on a similar survey administered in the first semester (Weatherford & Campbell, 2013) plus some additional reasons that we expected as possible responses. The first-semester survey yielded a disappointing response rate to this question, likely because many students were unwilling to take the time to write out their answers. Therefore, a multiple-choice question was used in order to obtain the maximum number of responses. Finally, one open-ended question asked students who did not take any quizzes to explain their reasons why.

Analysis

The results were analyzed with Stata Statistical Software (v. 12) using a two-sample *t* test with unequal variances. This test was used to determine if the means of different groups were equal. We compared the results of two sets of groups: 1st-year students versus 2nd-year students, and students who chose M-Reader versus those who chose book reports. We considered the means to be different at the 0.10 significance level.

Survey Results
Assessment Preferences

Overall, the students were nearly evenly divided, with a small majority indicating a preference for M-Reader (56%) over book reports (44%). However, there was a significant difference between 1st-year and 2nd-year students' preferences ($p < .001$). The 1st-year students ($n = 57$) and the 2nd-year students ($n = 39$) reported nearly opposite preferences, with 74% of 1st-years preferring M-Reader versus 31% of 2nd-year students. On the other hand, only 26% of 1st-year stu-

dents stated a preference for book reports, whereas a majority (69%) of 2nd-year students indicated they would rather write reports. Possible reasons for this disparity will be addressed in the Discussion section.

The next question asked respondents to indicate the reasons for their preferences. They were given seven options (plus "other") to choose from in each case and were instructed to choose as many reasons as applied (see Appendix, questions 10A and 10B). The results for M-Reader are as follows. (The percentages indicate the number of students who selected each reason as one of their choices. Since respondents were able to select as many reasons as they wanted, the numbers do not add up to 100%.) The most common reason for preferring M-Reader was that students thought it was convenient to access quizzes on the Internet, with 85% percent of respondents choosing this option. (However, it should be noted that this was the first choice provided, so it is possible that some students simply chose the first option in order to quickly finish the survey.) Other reasons selected, in order of popularity, were the efficiency of doing online quizzes (56%), the ability to access the quizzes on their smartphones (54%), the sense of accomplishment they received upon successfully completing a quiz (50%), the ability to keep track of their progress online (41%), and the short amount of time it took to complete the quizzes (33%). The least popular option was "Using M-Reader is fun," with 15% of the respondents selecting this option.

As for students who chose book reports, most of the choices concern criticisms of M-Reader rather than the merits of doing book reports themselves. The most popular choice was, "The 24-hour time delay between quizzes is too long." (Once again, however, this was the first choice.) This refers to the way the M-Reader system was set up. After students completed a quiz, they had to wait 24 hours before they were allowed to take another quiz. Other reasons chosen were the inability to retake failed quizzes (69%), the inconvenience of having to access the Internet (45%), the short time

limit to complete the quizzes (31%), and the difficulty of the quizzes themselves (21%). As for positive opinions about book reports, 50% of the respondents selected the ability to express their thoughts freely in book reports and 12 % chose "I can write a book report without reading the entire book."

Number of Quizzes Taken

The first question on the survey asked students to report the number of quizzes that they took during the semester. They were asked to indicate the number of quizzes by selecting a range (1 = 0, 2 = 1-2, 3 = 3-4, 4 = 5-6, 5 = 7-8, 6 = 9-10, and 7 = more than 10 quizzes). Students who stated a preference for M-Reader reported that they took more quizzes on average (μ = 4.47) than those who preferred book reports (μ = 3.93, p = 0.088).

Opinions About Graded Readers

Table 1 illustrates the students' opinions of graded readers, comparing the average responses of the M-Reader (MR) group with the book report (BR) group. This data is based on 12 six-point Likert scale questions, in which 6 = strongly agree and 1 = strongly disagree.

Table 1. Opinions About Graded Readers

Item	MR	SD	BR	SD	p =
fun reading materials	4.037	1.303	3.561	1.285	0.040
enjoyable as English learning materials	4.019	1.353	3.667	1.223	0.093
something I looked forward to reading each week	2.907	1.120	2.405	1.231	0.021
not my favorite assignment	3.185	1.361	4.167	1.591	0.001
boring reading materials	2.907	1.307	3.024	1.179	0.324

Item	MR	SD	BR	SD	p =
materials that I want to keep reading during school vacation	3.278	1.406	2.548	1.152	0.003
useful for increasing my vocabulary	4.000	1.346	3.707	1.078	0.121
useful for improving my reading fluency	4.259	1.291	3.667	1.162	0.010
useful for improving my reading comprehension	4.463	1.284	3.857	1.138	0.008
useful for improving my reading speed	4.370	1.364	3.929	1.218	0.049
useful for improving my overall English ability	4.315	1.241	3.881	1.131	0.039
unsuitable as English teaching learning materials	2.685	1.385	2.881	1.109	0.222

Note. MR: group that preferred M-Reader (n = 54); BR: group that preferred book reports (n = 42); rated on 6-point scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*.

The results show that students who indicated a preference for M-Reader had a higher opinion of graded readers than those who choose book reports. All items with a positive stance toward graded readers have a higher level of agreement among the M-Reader group, and one negative item (d. "not my favorite assignment") has a higher level of disagreement among this group. However, item g. "useful for increasing my vocabulary" was not statistically significant (p > 0.10). The differences in opinion about the two other negative items (e. and l.) were also not statistically significant.

Differences between the two groups concerning the difficulty of the books were generally not statistically significant. However, one item (3d.) yielded intriguing results. This was a semantic differential item on a scale of -3 to +3 that asked students to judge whether the

books were easy to finish (-3) or difficult to finish (+3). The M-Reader group's average was -0.278, but the book report group averaged 0.405 (p = 0.023). This indicates that the book report group found the books more difficult to finish.

Opinions About M-Reader

The survey included five semantic differential items to gauge the students' impressions of the M-Reader website. The items and their mean results are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Opinions About M-Reader

Item	BR	MR	p =
The M-Reader website was difficult to use / easy to use	-1.286	-0.074	0.001
The M-Reader quizzes were difficult / easy	-1.524	-0.259	0.000
The 15-minute time limit was insufficient / sufficient	-1.024	0.167	0.001
Reaching the word-count goal was difficult / easy	-1.262	-0.778	0.099
The 24-hour time delay was short / long	1.524	2.094	0.072

Note. MR: group that preferred M-Reader (n = 54); BR: group that preferred book reports (n = 42); rated on 6-point scale from -3 to +3.

Unsurprisingly, students who preferred book reports appeared to have a generally more negative opinion about M-Reader. Compared to the M-Reader group, they found the site more difficult to use, the quizzes more difficult to pass, the time limit more insufficient, and the word-count goal more difficult to reach. The only item that

the book report group had a more positive attitude about was the 24-hour time delay. Although this group indicated that it was their main reason for choosing book reports over M-Reader, they do not appear to feel that the time delay was quite as long as the M-Reader group did.

Discussion

Approximately half of all students indicated a preference for book reports, while the other half preferred M-Reader quizzes. However, when the results were sorted by year in school, 1st-year students and 2nd-year students reported nearly opposite preferences, with a large majority of 1st-years preferring M-Reader and most 2nd-year students reporting a preference for writing reports. This may be explained by the fact that 2nd-year students did not use M-Reader in their 1st year; they did book reports instead. Therefore, it is possible that they preferred the method of assessment that they were most accustomed to.

We also suspected that students who preferred book reports had discovered they could avoid actually reading and comprehending the books in their entirety and simply "fake" their reports, as suggested in the introduction. Therefore, we included the choice "I can write a book report without reading the entire book" as one of the reasons for preferring book reports. However, only 12% of the students selected this as one of their reasons for preferring book reports. It is possible that students really did not feel this way about book reports, or it may be that they did not want to admit to what essentially amounts to cheating. Although the percentage was small, it might have been higher if the survey had been completely anonymous.

Additional evidence comes from the results for item 3d, which showed that the book report group found the books more difficult to finish. This also suggests some students might prefer book reports because they can write them without reading and understand-

ing the books in their entirety. Another piece of data to consider is the difference in assessment preferences between 1st- and 2nd-year students. There is the possibility that students who had done book reports before had discovered that they could get away with writing the reports without reading the books, an opportunity that the 1st-year students did not have.

The differences in opinion about graded readers are also noteworthy. The students who chose M-Reader had generally more favorable views of the pleasure of reading and the usefulness of graded readers. This may suggest that they had a better understanding of the value of extensive reading.

Conclusion

The goal of an ER program is to have students read as much as possible, and the assessment method that teachers choose should motivate students to achieve that goal. In ER, evaluation should be as effortless as possible so that students can get on with their reading. The M-Reader quiz system is designed to meet these criteria by offering quick and simple online quizzes that provide immediate feedback. On the other hand, completing a proper written book report—in English, especially—is more time consuming, and students have to wait for their teachers' feedback. We wondered then, why a large number of students continued to choose to do book reports instead of online quizzes.

Despite many students' preference for book reports, our results suggest that M-Reader can be a very useful tool for assessment in an ER program. Students who preferred M-Reader took more quizzes than students in the book report group, likely indicating they read more books. Students in the M-Reader group also had a higher opinion of the pleasure of reading and the usefulness of graded readers, which shows that they had a clearer understanding of the benefits of extensive reading. In order to encourage students to use

M-Reader (and thereby read more books), an ER program should implement the use of the website from the beginning of the first year. If students are exposed to book reports first, they may not be able to appreciate the benefits of M-Reader. In addition, students need to receive clear explanations of the purpose and goals of extensive reading. When students understand that in order to get the most out of ER they should be reading a large number of books in their entirety each semester, they may be less enthusiastic about writing book reports. Finally, students should understand how M-Reader is designed to meet the goals of extensive reading. M-Reader is meant to take away some of the burden of accountability for their reading by providing a quick and simple way to show they have read a book. When students fully understand the goals of ER and how M-Reader can help them fulfill those goals, they will be able to take full advantage of this powerful assessment tool and reap the benefits of reading extensively.

Bio Data

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Appendix
English Translation of the Survey

M-Reader Survey January 2014

Student Number:_____Class:_____

1. How many books did you read and take M-Reader quizzes on this semester?

   1. 0   **2.** 1-2   **3.** 3-4   **4.** 5-6

   5. 7-8   **6.** 9-10   **7.** more than 10

If you answered **1** (0 books), please skip to question 11.

How much do you agree with the following statements?

2. The library readers were:

   Strongly agree<—>Strongly disagree

   a. fun reading materials.   6   5   4   3   2   1

   b. enjoyable as English learning materials.   6   5   4   3   2   1

   c. something I looked forward to each week.   6   5   4   3   2   1

   d. not my favorite assignment.   6   5   4   3   2   1

   e. boring reading materials.   6   5   4   3   2   1

   f. materials that I want to keep reading even during school vacation.   6   5   4   3   2   1

   g. useful for increasing my vocabulary.   6   5   4   3   2   1

   h. useful for improving my reading fluency.   6   5   4   3   2   1

i.   useful for improving my reading comprehension.

   6   5   4   3   2   1

j.   j. useful for improving my reading speed.

   6   5   4   3   2   1

k.   useful for improving my overall English ability.

   6   5   4   3   2   1

l.   unsuitable as English learning materials.

   6   5   4   3   2   1

What did you think of the levels of the readers?

3.   The readers were:

   a.   too easy (in content)   -3 -2 -1   1   2   3 too difficult (in content)

   b.   contained only familiar words -3 -2 -1   1   2   3 contained too many unfamiliar words

   c.   not at all difficult to read -3 -2 -1   1   2   3 extremely difficult to read

   d.   easy to finish -3 -2 -1   1   2   3 difficult to finish

What did you think of M-Reader?

4. The M-Reader website was...

   difficult to use   -3 -2 -1   1   2   3   easy to use

5. The M-Reader quizzes were...

   difficult   -3 -2 -1   1   2   3   easy

6. The 15-minute time limit was...

   insufficient   -3 -2 -1   1   2   3   sufficient

7. Reaching the word-count goal was...

   difficult   -3 -2 -1   1   2   3   easy

8. The 24-hour time delay between quizzes was...

   short -3 -2 -1   1   2   3 long

9. Would you prefer to do M-Reader quizzes or write book reports to show that you have read the books?

   a.   M-Reader quizzes (go to question 10A)

   b.   book reports (go to question 10B)

10A. Why did you choose M-Reader quizzes? Circle as many of the reasons below that apply.

   a.   It is convenient to take the quizzes on the Internet.

   b.   Taking quizzes is more efficient than writing reports.

   c.   I can take quizzes on my smartphone.

   d.   It does not take a lot of time to take the quizzes.

   e.   I feel a sense of accomplishment when I pass a quiz.

   f.   I can keep track of my reading progress.

   g.   Using M-Reader is fun.

   h.   Other:

10B. Why did you choose book reports? Circle as many of the reasons below that apply.

   a.   The 24-hour time delay between quizzes is too long.

   b.   There is no chance to retake a failed quiz.

   c.   The quizzes are too difficult.

   d.   The quiz time limit of 15 minutes is too short.

   e.   Accessing the Internet is inconvenient.

   f.   I can express myself freely in a book report.

   g.   I can write a book report without reading the entire book.

   h.   Other:

11. If you did not take any quizzes on M-Reader during the semester, please explain why.