

Sharing Reading Experiences with University Students Using Goodreads



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Extensive reading (ER) practitioners emphasize the importance of keeping track of what students read. Some prefer to implement paper-based reading logs while others use an on-line ER site such as M-Reader or Xreading. This paper reports on an alternative attempt to share reading experiences with students using Goodreads, “the world’s largest site for readers and book recommendations.” Seven third-year and eleven fourth-year university students in Osaka, Japan participated in the project. The students signed up for Goodreads and kept track of what they read in their online accounts. Although the fourth-year students were too busy job-hunting to read, the third-year students were able to try out the application inside and outside of the classroom. Unlike M-Reader or Xreading, it was not meant for ER class management; however, it provided a potential tool to inspire students and lead them to the life-long pleasure of reading.

Research suggests that extensive reading (ER) is a very effective way to enhance students’ literacy in English (Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2004). ER not only improves reading competency (Rodrigo, Krashen, & Gribbons, 2004) but also other skills such as vocabulary (Pitts, White, & Krashen, 1989; Day, Omura, & Hiramitsu, 1991; Lao & Krashen, 2000; Horst, 2005; Nation, 2008), listening and speaking (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Cho & Krashen, 1994; Nakanishi & Ueda, 2011) and writing (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Lai, 1993; Mason & Krashen, 1997). ER also has a positive effect on motivation (Elley, 1991; Cho & Krashen, 1994; Takase, 2008). Reading books that learners can easily understand and enjoy is motivating, and Nuttall’s (1996) virtuous cycle shows that if they can understand better, they enjoy reading, then read faster and more, and eventually they become fluent readers.

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Many teachers in various teaching environments have reported their attempts and outcomes of ER. Some have implemented computer-based ER programs while others have tried out more personal, low-tech approaches. Some universities or departments have embedded ER in their core curriculum. Robb (2010) reported a university-wide ER program involving more than 2,500 students at Kyoto Sangyo University. Nishizawa and Yoshioka (2011) organized weekly 45-minute ER classes for 6 years at the National Institute of Technology, Toyota College, and those students in the electrical and electronic engineering department demonstrated improvements on the TOEIC® Listening and Reading scores. Yet, practitioners also understand how difficult it is to keep the students motivated to read extensively.

Literature Review

As Bamford and Day (2004) and Nation (2013) point out, there are various ways to integrate ER in school, and quite a few universities have already included ER into

their curriculum. Robb (2010) developed a high-tech management system using MoodleReader to run a university-wide ER program. For each book students read, they have to take a computer-based test to gain enough points (calculated using “a weighed page value”) to pass their course. “The targets for the number of words read were set according to the English level of the students, which was determined by a placement test at the start of the year” (Gillis-Furutaka, 2015, p. 6).

Others use M-Reader, a non-Moodle, more user-friendly browser-based interface. It is a free program for tracking ER activity, with a comprehensive online database of over 6,000 quizzes on graded readers and “youth readers” books used with native-speaking children and young adults. Using M-Reader, Nakanishi (2018) attempted to explore whether there are any differences between a free-reading group and a restricted-reading group in a university EFL class. Similarly, Xreading, “an online, virtual library with hundreds of graded readers supported by an easy to use learner management system” has been gaining popularity, and it is now implemented not only at university (Shibata & Rachi, 2019) but also public senior high school settings (O’Sullivan, 2019).

In turn, instead of using readily available online software for ER, Sullivan (2018) designed her course using Google Forms and Quizlet. She carefully selected non-fiction graded readers and created digital versions of class handouts, audio files, links to online resources, and quizzes.

On the other hand, Takase (2008) advocates more personal, low-tech approaches and argues that giving students time to read in class and have them start with easy books are the two important keys to success. Day (2019, p. 13) points out that “Teacher

involvement concerns ensuring that the instructors or teachers who use ER in their classroom understand what ER is, what their roles are, and what the roles of the students are.”

ER at Setsunan University

Matsuda (2011) launched the department-wide ER marathon in 2007. However, it was entirely on a voluntary basis, and participation was quite limited. When the new curriculum was introduced in 2015, ER was included in its core reading curriculum. All the teachers (17 in total) teaching first-year, second-year, and third-year reading classes (fifteen 90-minute classes per term) are asked to spend 15 minutes of their class time on ER and 10 minutes on speed-reading. Students keep reading records on an A-4 size colored sheet and submit it to their teachers at the end of the term. It is based on the honor system, and it is difficult to tell whether all the classes are conducted accordingly. Even when teachers follow the guidelines and give 15 minutes of ER time in class, it is not sufficient. Students need to be encouraged to read outside of class as well.

Meanwhile, the author discovered a free online site called Goodreads. It contains 2.6 billion books and 90 million reviews. By creating an account, users can keep track of their reading. Moreover, its group function allows them to create a group and share reading experiences. With a built-in scanner, books (barcodes) can be searched and book information can be obtained. No budget is required, and a smartphone will suffice.

Research Questions

This study examines whether Goodreads, a free online site for readers, can motivate

students to read. The following research questions are explored in this study:

1. Will students find Goodreads easy to use?
2. Will the group function of Goodreads work to monitor students' ER activities?
3. Will sharing reading experiences using Goodreads motivate students?

Method

Participants

Eleven 4th-year students (6 females and 5 males) and seven 3rd-year students (4 females and 3 males) participated in this project. They were all English majors, and their TOEIC® Listening & Reading scores ranged from 350 to 715. One of the 3rd-year students took part while studying in Vancouver, Canada. All of them were the author's seminar students.

Instruments

1) Goodreads

Goodreads claims to be "the world's largest site for readers and book recommendations" launched in January 2007 to "help people find and share books they love." (n.d.) Users download the application first and create an account.

2) Online Survey

An online survey was created using Survey Monkey to elicit students' feelings about ER activities using Goodreads. The survey consisted of 8 questions written in both English and Japanese. The students answered anonymously.

Procedures

On the first day of each group's seminar, the students were instructed to take out their smartphones and download the Goodreads application. Then they set up an account and also joined either the 3rd-year seminar group or the 4th-year seminar group that the teacher had created. The teacher invited each student to the appropriate group, and the students made "friends" with each other within the group.

Since they were not experienced readers yet, they were advised to read a lot of easy books aiming for a total of 100 books in the spring term (15 weeks) in 2018. To show the author's commitment, she also joined them and set the goal at 20 (regular) books.

The students kept track of what they read in their online accounts. They chose what they wanted to read freely from the reading lounge in the library, which contained various series of graded readers and leveled readers as well as children's literature and young adult novels. The books they selected were added to their online bookshelves by scanning ISBN barcodes. They were initially saved in the "want to read" category, then later moved to the "currently reading" category, and finally stored in the "read" category.

The students were able to see what the other members were reading and receive updates about their own progress as well as the other members' reading activities. At the end of the term, an online survey was conducted to elicit students' feedback. They were asked to answer the questions on their smartphones.

Results

The Amount of Reading

Figure 1 shows the number of books the third-year students read. It is very noticeable that there was a big discrepancy between those who read diligently and those who did not. Most of them mainly read easy leveled readers such as *Step into Reading*, *Oxford Reading Tree*, *Penguin (Pearson) Kids*, and other picture books.

Four students (3A, 3B, 3C, and 3D) tried hard to achieve the goal, but two students (3F and 3G) were just not interested and failed to show enthusiasm throughout the term. Student 3E was the one who was studying in Canada, and it was likely that she did not have access to ER materials. Thus, it was difficult for her to read many easy books such as leveled readers or graded readers. Yet, she chose some good children’s books including *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Dahl, 2005), *Matilda* (Dahl, 1998), and *Wonder* (Palacio, 2012).

On the other hand, no fourth-year student read more than 10 books (minimum: 2 books, maximum: 9 books, average: 5.5 books) mainly because they were very busy job-hunting and writing their graduation theses at the same time. The author had just obtained a newly-released nonfiction series

(*World History Readers*, Waring; 2017) and let the fourth-year students borrow the new books. The series had not been entered into the database yet; therefore, the whole series was manually added to Goodreads by the author. In the end, the fourth-year students read the nonfiction series only and did not explore further.

Knowing that her reading activities were automatically notified to her students, the author also strived to achieve her goal, reading from classic fantasy to political nonfiction such as *The Fellowship of the Ring* (Tolkien, 2002), *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* (Rowling, Thorne, & Tiffany, 2016), *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood, 1998), *The Heart’s Invisible Furies* (Boyne, 2017), *The Killer of the Flower Moon* (Grann, 2017), *Human Acts* (Kang, 2017), and *Hillbilly Elegy* (Vance, 2016).

Online Survey

At the end of the term, an online survey was conducted using Monkey Survey. It was created to elicit students’ feedback on the ER activity using Goodreads. Figures 2 to 7 show the students’ responses.

Q1: Was the Goodreads application easy to use?

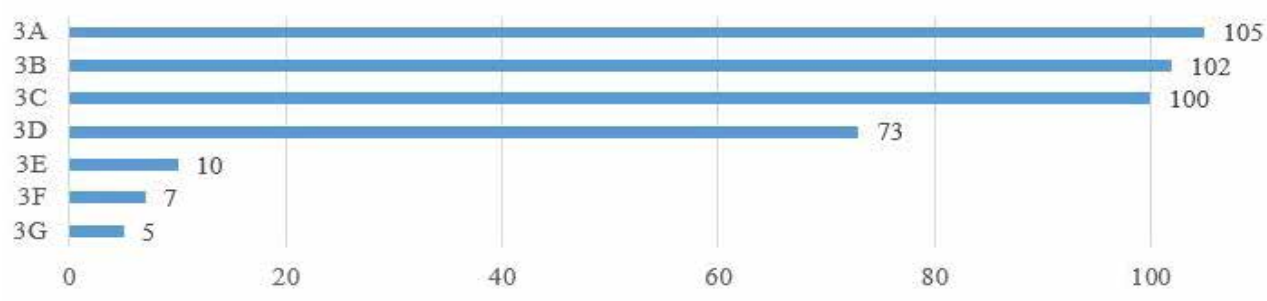


Figure 1. The number of books read by third-year students.

As Figure 2 below shows, about 60% of the students responded that it was easy or relatively easy to use while about 40% of them said that it was hard or a little hard to use.

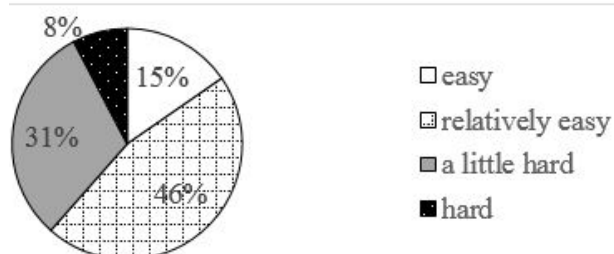


Figure 2. Usability of Goodreads

Q2: Please explain the reason. The original answers in Japanese were translated into English for this paper.

The students felt Goodreads was easy or relatively easy because “I’m familiar with similar apps,” “It was easy,” “there are many functions,” “I can simply scan the book and it will be automatically added,” and “I was able to manage what I’d read.”

On the other hand, there were also a few critical opinions. Some students found it hard or a little hard to use it because “It was written in English,” “It was hard to understand how to use it,” “The UI was troublesome,” or “I had to use the app.” Others claimed that “I sometimes had trouble scanning books,” or “It was bothersome to scan a book every time.” One student pointed out that “It would have been better if it provided the word count.”

Q3: Was it inspiring to know what/how much your peers were reading?

As shown in Figure 3, although no student found it “inspiring” to know what/how much their peers were reading, about half of the students felt that it was “relatively inspiring.” The students received updates

about their peers’ reading activities, and they got a message when someone added a book or finished a book. The messages came into their regular e-mail accounts (e.g. Gmail or university e-mail) that they used to sign up for Goodreads.

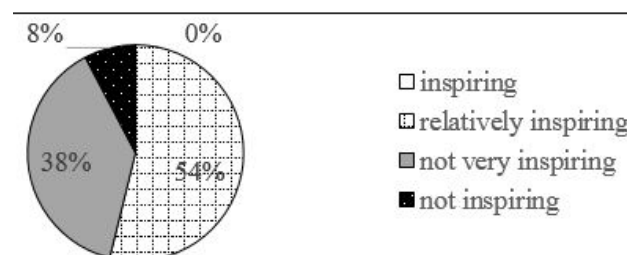


Figure 3. Inspiration by peers’ reading activities

Q4: Was it inspiring to know what/how much your teacher is reading?

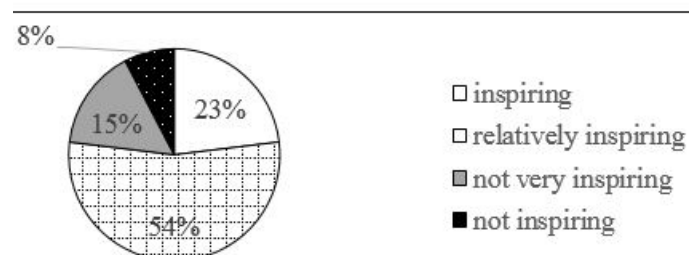


Figure 4. Inspiration by the teacher’s reading activities

Interestingly, almost 80% of the students felt that it was inspiring or relatively inspiring to know what/ how much the teacher was reading. Similar to their peers’ updates, the students received a message whenever the teacher added books to her “want to read” list, changed the status to “currently reading,” and then to “read.”

Q5: Was receiving updates about your Goodreads “friends” inspiring or bothersome?

This question refers to various updates sent by Goodreads to the students’ e-mail

accounts regarding the books the other group members were reading. There were also personal book recommendations from Goodreads. The teacher anticipated at the beginning that this part of the Goodreads function can be annoying. Yet, as shown in Figure 5, more than 60% of the students found the updates inspiring or relatively inspiring. Receiving updates were accepted more favorably than the teacher had expected. However, it was often true that some students found this service bothersome or a little bothersome.

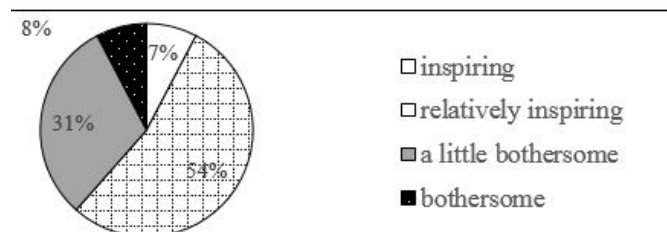


Figure 5. Feedback about receiving updates

Q6: Is it a good way to record the books you read using Goodreads?

As Figure 6 shows, no one gave negative feedback, answering either "good" (54%) or "relatively good" (46%).

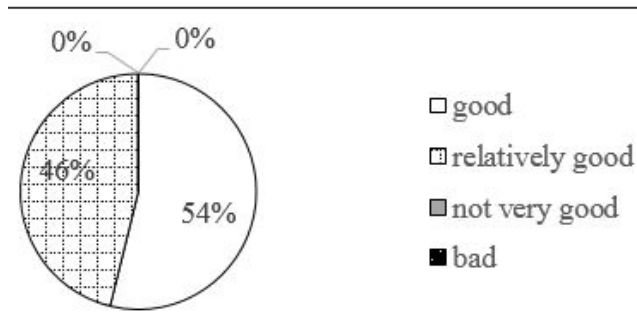


Figure 6. Feedback about keeping reading records using Goodreads

Q7: Please explain the reason.

I feel a sense of achievement.

You can see how other people are reading, and that's encouraging for us.

It's easier than writing on paper, and it's good that you can check your record on your smartphone.

You can check how much you read.

You can see how much you read at a glance.

I don't forget what I've read.

It'll give me a chance to read a book I didn't know.

It makes me feel I should read.

What you have built up is visible anytime.

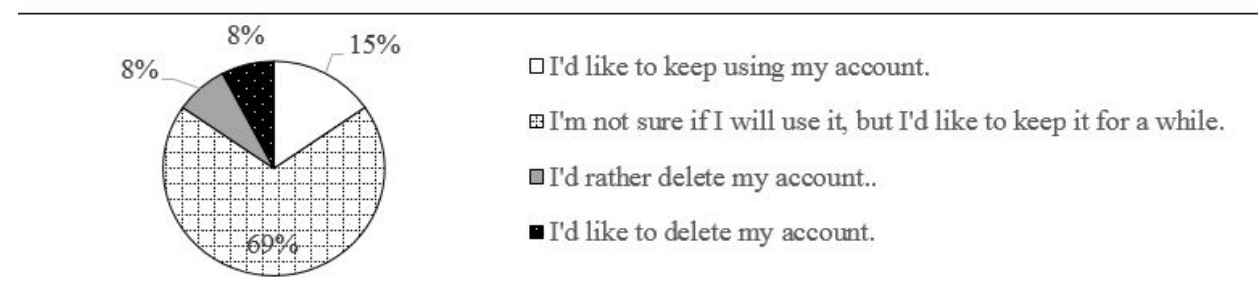


Figure 7. Future use of Goodreads

You can avoid reading the same book.

It's easy to see what/when/how much I read.

*I'm keeping records of what I usually read,
and I can look back on what I've read.*

Q8: Would you like to keep your Goodreads account or delete it?

Although only 15% of the students were willing to keep using the Goodreads accounts, about 70% of the students answered that they would like to keep the account for a while.

Discussion

When Goodreads was selected, the author's intention was to share the pleasure of reading and show the vast world of books. Unfortunately, almost all of her students do not like to read, so although ER is included in the core curriculum, they get by without doing it and give up 10% of their grade. The author was not teaching those reading classes, but she wanted to give a soft nudge on the side. She was hoping that someone in her seminars would be interested in using Goodreads and be motivated to read. The aim of the experiment was also to find out if the application could be used for ER group management.

The attempt yielded mixed results. Three third-year students worked hard and achieved the set goal of 100 books while one student did not achieve the goal, and two students were indifferent. The fourth-year students read a couple of nonfiction books, but they did not go beyond that.

The survey at the end of the term revealed their candid responses about Goodreads. The application turned out to be easy for some and a little hard or troublesome for others to use. The site was all in English

and the dense information on the top page was probably intimidating for those who do not like to read. The scanning system worked fine with iPhones, but not always with Android phones. It was also a little bothersome for some students to scan every book they read.

Yet, the survey also displayed some positive comments about the implementation of Goodreads. The students especially liked the fact that they can keep track of what they have read, and they can go back anytime and look at the list of the books they read. It is very visual and gives them a sense of achievement. It was surprising that the students did not mind too much about being connected, either. Rather, it was somewhat inspiring to know what the other students or the teacher were reading. Being connected with the students gave the teacher a chance and some pressure to read as well. As Day (2018, p. 13) claims, teachers "demonstrate their commitment to reading in the FL by doing what they ask their students to do—to read—and to share their enjoyment with their students." By using Goodreads, the students at least saw what the teacher was reading, and the teacher was able to observe what they were reading.

One of the advantages of Goodreads from the teacher's point of view is that the students' reading activities are visible. The teacher receives updates about what books they added to their bookshelves, what books they are currently reading (or what page they are on if they input the data, which they do not normally do), and what books they have just finished reading. It is as if the teacher receives a daily report. In other words, if they did not read anything, the teacher did not get any report although she was able to see their records anytime if she accessed their Goodreads pages.

Likewise, the students received the teacher's updates whether they liked it or not. Since the teacher read 20 books, they received 60 messages at minimum such as "Sae added as to-read," "Sae added as currently-reading," and "Sae rated (the title of the book read)." She thought that this function would annoy her students; however, the Q4 survey results suggest that it may have worked to encourage her students.

Furthermore, there are a variety of books in the database and the selection was not limited to regular ER materials. Thus, even the third-year student studying in Canada (3E in Figure 1) was able to join the project, reading regular children's books such as *Charlie and Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda*, and *Wonder*.

However, it was observed that Goodreads is not meant for ER class management. The teacher can create a private (secret) group, invite her students, and they can join her group, but they have to be friends with one another to be connected and receive their updates. It was later found that they can still look at their peers' reading records if the teacher is connected with individual students. It is as if they are indirectly connected via the teacher.

At the end of the year, Goodreads issues a summary of individual's reading activity including "I read xxx pages across xxx books," "shortest book," "longest book," "average length," "most popular," "least popular," "my average rating for 2018," "highest rated on Goodreads," and the images of all the books you read, which can be quite rewarding to look at. It is certainly an appealing feature for bookworms, and the author hopes her students also enjoy the function and try the reading challenge every year. That way, they can keep reading for years to come.

Conclusion

This project attempted to loosely connect university students and the teacher using Goodreads. It turned out that Goodreads was not suitable for ER class management, and the group system did not function as desired. A few students also reported some technical problems while others found it a bit annoying to receive frequent updates from Goodreads regarding what their peers and teacher were reading. Nevertheless, surprisingly, most of the students evaluated the experience favorably and answered they would like to keep the account for a while.

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