

# E-learning Versus Classroom Activities: Student Preferences in a Japanese University



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Xreading is an online virtual library and learner management system that claims that it makes graded readers easily accessible for students while simultaneously making teacher assessment and management easier as well. This article describes the use of Xreading at a medium-sized private university in Japan in a reading course with two lessons a week in an eight-week term. The article compares the use of Xreading alone in the first four weeks and supplemented with classroom activities in the second four weeks. Despite the willingness of the students to access and use graded readers in Xreading there was a preference for 'traditional' paper-based classroom activities. While the growth of online reading progresses, teachers and students alike must bear in mind the continued relevance, usefulness and effectiveness of more established and traditional in-class activities.

## Background & Study Premise

It seems students cannot live without their smartphones but can they still learn without them? Research in the past ten years (Gayan, 2019; Loan, 2011; Ujakpa Ujakpa, Heukelman, Kleinveldt, Nyalugwe & Kiana, 2018) has shown that students are increasingly prepared and willing to use online reading resources and, in some cases, prefer e-books and mobile based reading to that of paper-based books. Online extensive reading resources such as Extensive Reading Central, MReader and XReading, and the attached learner management systems (LMS) are a welcome addition to any modern reading classroom and seem to be increasingly popular with students and teachers alike. The appeal of such resources is manifold:

- To the students, they offer large banks of online graded readers leveled according to difficulty and content.
- This content can be accessed by multiple students simultaneously on a variety of devices: computers, tablets and smartphones.
- The design of these LMS can detect and hence deter cheating by students through automatically checking reading speed and also offering quizzes on individual books with a pre-determined pass rate so that the book can be considered read to a satisfactory level.
- To the teacher they offer the convenience of being able to centrally oversee and administrate large numbers of students and classes. It is also possible to praise, encourage and possibly admonish students according to their work and success rates.

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However, these trends away from paper-based books and in-class reading are not universally successful or accepted by either students or teachers. This raises the question, to what extent is there still a role for established classroom activities such as speed reading, sustained silent reading (SSR) and reading comprehension?

## Research Questions

The research aimed to find out:

1. What are the students' attitudes to online/mobile based extensive reading (ER)?
2. What are the students' attitudes to other in class reading activities such as speed reading, intensive reading (IR) and sustained silent reading (SSR)?

## Research Method

In order to answer the research questions above, a two-part survey was carried out on a group of 31 Japanese university students in a compulsory reading class in which there were two classes a week for an eight-week term from November 2018-January 2019. This was their second university reading class after completing a 15-week semester course from April through July 2018. Online questionnaires were created with Google Forms and the students completed them using their smartphones. The two questionnaires were held on Week 4 and Week 8. See Appendix 1 and 2 for the respective questionnaires.

### *In & Out of Class Contents*

The lessons were divided into 2 time periods; Period 1: Weeks 1 to 4 and Period 2: Weeks 5 to 8. The in and out of class contents for Period 1 were divided into textbook based 'intensive reading' using 'TRIO Reading 3' (Adam, 2013) and online

based 'extensive reading' using Xreading. Period 2 contained the same contents as Period 1 with the addition of speed reading using 'Reading for Speed and Fluency:1' (Nation and Malcher, 2007) , textbook questions self-made by the students and SSR.

## Results

To the first question, about gender identification, of the 31 students in the class, there were 19 who responded female and 12 who responded male. The students' responses related to general attitudes towards reading, reading in English in particular, and the perceived effect reading will have on English ability are shown in Table 1.

Over the two questionnaires, the results from Questions 2 and 3 show the number of students with a positive attitude towards reading in their own language increasing from 21 to 24 and in English from 19 to 24. However, the numbers of students who were 'neutral' towards reading in general decreased over the two questionnaires from 8 to 5 as they did in relation to reading in English from 10 to 4. The number of students who stated they didn't enjoy reading in English increased from 2 to 3. It is possible to see that while the students displayed a generally favorable attitude to both reading and towards reading in English and more students came to enjoy reading more over the eight-week term, there were also more students who became neutral or negative towards reading in English.

In response to Question 4 there was very little change in the perceived effect that reading in English will have on reading skills between the time of the two questionnaires with the only noticeable difference being the number of students who either 'agreed' or were 'neutral'.

Table 1. Number of responses for select questionnaire items (respondents n = 31)

Question	Questionnaire 1					Questionnaire 2				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2. Do you enjoy reading?	5	16	8	2	0	10	14	5	2	0
3. Do you enjoy reading in English?	7	12	10	1	1	8	16	4	3	0
4. Do you think reading English will improve your English skills?	11	15	3	2	0	11	14	4	2	0
6. Do you think your English skills improved because you used Xreading?	3	14	12	2	0	1	15	10	4	1

One of the two aims of the research questions was to find out the students’ attitudes to online/mobile based ER and the results that indicate this are shown in Table 2.

In both Period 1 and 2, more than half the students considered Xreading to have improved their English skills showing a relatively constant and favorable attitude towards online learning. It must be noted that the combined number of students who ‘strongly agreed’ and ‘agreed’ with the question fell by one student from 17 to 16. Similarly, there was a drop of 2 students, who were ‘neutral’. Attention should be brought to the rise in the number of students from 2 to 5 who either ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’ with that idea. This might indicate a slight growing of negative attitude towards mobile ER over time. Similarly, there are also indications

of change over which skills were perceived to have been affected by the use of online/mobile learning as shown in Table 3.

When students were asked to reflect upon the area which improved as a result of the in- and out-of-class activities, they indicated that there was very little difference in terms of the most popular areas, ‘Reading Speed’ and ‘Vocabulary’ with a slight fall in Questionnaire 2, from 37 to 31. Interestingly, the number of students who felt that their grammar and listening improved increased. This could be the first indication that extensive reading has started to show the extra beneficial effects such as enhanced grammar which Krashen (1993) has indicated in his research. Contrastingly, there was a drop of 1 student in self-perceived improved ‘General Understanding’.

Table 2. Number of responses for Item 6 (respondents n = 31)

Question	Questionnaire 1					Questionnaire 2				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6. Do you think your English skills improved because you used Xreading?	3	14	12	2	0	1	15	10	4	1

Table 3. Number of responses for Item 7 (respondents n = 31)

Question	Questionnaire 1						Questionnaire 2					
	Reading speed	Vocabulary	Grammar	General understanding	Listening	Speaking	Reading speed	Vocabulary	Grammar	General understanding	Listening	Speaking
7. Which area(s) do you think improved? (You can choose more than one area.)	20	17	5	11	4	2	17	14	9	10	8	0

\*While there were 31 students in both questionnaires, question 7 allowed students to select multiple answers so the total responses are more than 31.

Preferences for the three electronic options as well as the traditional option of a paper-based graded reader were posed in Question 8. Smartphones were the most popular choice in both questionnaires, with a slight decrease from 24 to 19. There was

also a drop in the number of students from 5 to 3 who preferred computers over the two four-week periods. Tablets were only chosen by 1 student, and only on Questionnaire 2. The change most worth remarking on is the doubling in popularity in

preferences for books from 4 students to 8 over the two questionnaires. So, while there is noticeable preference for online access across the three options there was also an increase in the choice for paper-based books over time.

As described above, in Period 2 the lessons supplemented the usual in-class activities and outside online reading with three additional activities of:

- speed reading carried out at the beginning of the class
- students making comprehension questions from passages from the course textbook which may be viewed as an intensive reading (IR) activity, and
- SSR carried out at the end of the class.

Speed reading was rated highest by 12 of the students, the IR activity by 10, and SSR by 9. With the number of students being 31, it can be seen that in this small sample the distribution was roughly equal.

## **Discussion**

The discussion of the results has been grouped together into three main areas:

1. Background information about students' attitudes towards reading in general and reading in English in particular.
2. Focusing on the first research question, "What are the students' attitudes to online/mobile based extensive reading (ER)?"
3. Focusing on the second research question, "What are the students' attitudes to other in class reading activities such as speed reading, intensive reading (IR) and sustained silent reading (SSR)?"

### ***Student General Attitudes***

The students in this study displayed a generally favorable attitude to both reading in their own language and towards reading in English and more students came to enjoy reading more over the eight-week term, there were also more students who disliked it. While these results may be disappointing, the increase in positive attitudes to both kinds of reading are encouraging and may point to the effectiveness of the outside online reading and the in-class activities.

### ***Students Attitudes to Online/Mobile Based Extensive Reading***

Overall it seems that the students in this study not only liked reading but also recognized the usefulness of reading, including online reading, and that reading in this way enhanced their English in areas that were to be expected, such as vocabulary, as well as in another less expected area i.e. grammar. If online reading is looked upon favorably and is thought to enhance certain areas of English proficiency, this raises the question, is there a shift away from paper-based books and is there a particular online means that is more favored over others?

Without post questionnaire interviews to elicit reasons for preferred methods it is supposition to guess at answers for the question in the preceding paragraph. However, it can be reasonably assumed that the students' personal familiarity with smartphones means that they are likely to readily accept it as a way to access study materials. It should be noted that online reading is not the 'be-all-or-end-all' of extensive reading and as was indicated by the books still remaining popular, there is still a recognized need and preference for paper-based books. In a similar way the results above have shown that in-class activities appear to have an effect

upon students reading ability and that the students perceive that for themselves.

### ***Student Attitudes to Other in Class Reading Activities***

The roughly equal preferences of popularity between the three paper-based activities is hardly surprising in that those were the only options on offer. The results would have certainly been different if more activities had been included. Also, if there had been a “none of the above” option then that might have been similarly popular.

The speed-reading exercise was the most popular of the three but then only three students directly mention ‘speed’ in their comments. The comment ‘Because I think it’s one of the practice for the TOEIC test’ was also given by a student who also selected speed reading. As were the comments ‘It’s enjoyable.’ and ‘It’s practical.’ However, due to the open nature of these comments it is problematic to say that the comment given was directly referenced to the activity chosen and may have been given in relation to the other activities as well. It is beyond the parameters of this paper to list and correlate the paper-based activity chosen with the comment given but this has the potential to reveal more about students’ attitudes towards the activities.

The IR activity was the second most popular of the activities and there might be two reasons for this. First, the students were actively involved in this process in that instead of answering pre-set questions from a passage in a textbook chosen by the teacher, the students chose the passage that they wanted to work on. In groups they thought of, developed and wrote the questions to be answered by themselves and other students. This high level of ‘self-investment’ in their own studying might have created a positive attitude towards this activity. It should be noted that this activity

was to be repeated in the end-of-term test and that this was explained to the students as such. Thus, the activity was more ‘pro-active’ in its nature but it was also in the students’ own best interests to become more proficient in this type of activity.

SSR was the third most popular activity but with a difference of 3 and 2 students between this activity and the other two activities respectively, it is difficult to say that this is significant or not. The timing of the activity, i.e. at the end of the lesson, may have contributed to its relative lack of popularity with student tiredness being a factor. It may also have been affected by that although SSR has been shown to be effective in Japanese learning environments (Takase, 2012), compared to other more ‘active’ classroom-based methods it might be perceived to be something that students could do outside of class and in their own time.

From the student comments, listed below, it can be seen that even though the students are willing to and in fact favor the use of smartphones for accessing graded readers, one student states they like ‘paper books’ and the four students making comments 10 and 17 might be referring to paper-based books as well. They are also keen to do a variety of different class-based activities using paper-based materials. Given that these students were first year students, it might be argued that these kinds of activities are similar to the way that they studied in high school, which was less than one year before the survey.

### **List of Student Comments**

1. We had fun.
2. It’s enjoyable.
3. It’s practical. (originally written in Japanese)

4. It was exciting
5. Answer is not one.
6. I like paper books.
7. I like reading English.
8. Because it is fun for me.
9. Sustained Silent Reading.
10. I like reading books. (2 students)
11. Because I can read speedy.
12. Because I like working with friends.
13. I think my reading speed became faster.
14. I can study with my friends. (2 students)
15. It is good for me to passages quickly.
16. It's so fun for me and the book is interesting.
17. I like reading English books. (2 students).
18. I can be improved my reading speed.
19. It's enjoyable (sic).
20. I could centence freely (sic).
21. I am busy at home.
22. Because it improve for me to grow up my reading concentration.
23. Read the books.
24. Answer is not one.
25. I can feel my writing skills improve.
26. I think I got better (originally written in Japanese).

27. Because I think it's one of the practice for the TOEIC test.

28. I like discuss.

### **Limitations**

The gender of the students was a question in both questionnaires but the results shown in the charts below reflect all the students in the survey and are not divided according to gender. Asking about gender and not using it in the results or the resulting interpretation could mean that the question itself was superfluous and a flaw of the investigation, however, the data may be analyzed and interpreted along gender lines in the future.

In Questionnaire 1, Items 2, 3, 4 and 6 and in Questionnaire 2, items 2, 3, 4, 6 and 12, the questions were flawed in that the respondents were given questions rather than statements to agree or disagree with. This flaw was discovered after the data had been obtained. The fault of this lies with the researcher alone. The data has been used as is and the results and interpretation must therefore be taken circumspectly.

With only one group of student data, it is difficult to say whether the use of in-class activities in the Period 2 had a greater affect than online reading. To see if this is true or not, future research could be expanded to three groups of students: a group of students that does online reading and in-class activities, a second group of students that does only online reading and a third group that does only in-class activities. In this way, it might be possible to see which approach is more effective than the others and also which is more favored by the students.

It also must be noted that despite the convenience of multiple question surveys answered by large numbers of students, they can be in their very nature problematic. Even though such surveys allow researchers

to obtain large amounts of information that can be analyzed and interpreted later, they do not show individual differences nor do they provide opportunity for the students to express, and consequently the researcher to find out, reasons for the answers given to questions in the survey. Post-survey interviews potentially offer an opportunity to supply this additional information as well as possibly providing insight into any gender differences or any other factors that might affect their reading preferences and learning styles.

### Summary

This small study indicates that Japanese university students increasingly favor the use of online reading resources and in particular on mobiles/smartphones. It also shows that they realize its usefulness and that they believe it will improve their general English skills and reading in particular. However, there are still some preferences for more 'traditional' in-class activities with paper-based materials. The relatively small number of students in the survey only offer an indication of student preferences with regard to both online reading compared to paper-based reading and in-class activities. Increasing the number of students in any future surveys as well expanding the scope of the research to include post-survey interviews can only be of benefit in terms of providing a more detailed and revealing picture of student reading habits and preferred learning styles in the modern-day classroom in which the balance between traditional paper-based and online learning is constantly negotiated and renegotiated.

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## Appendix A

2018 Faculty of Global and Community Studies: English Reading 2: Term 4: Questionnaire 1

This is an anonymous questionnaire. Your answers will be used for to improve future lesson and for research by Daniel James. The results will not be shared with anyone else nor will they be shared with any outside person or group.

1. Are you male or female?
  - Female
  - Male
  - Prefer not to say
  - Other
2. Do you enjoy reading?
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
3. Do you enjoy reading in English?
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
  -
4. Do you think reading English will improve your reading skills?
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
  -
5. In the first 4 weeks of this term, how many times have you used 'Xreading'?
  - Never
  - 1-5 Times
  - 6-10 Times
  - 11-15 Times
  - 16-20 Times
  - More than 20 Times
6. Do you think your English skills improved because you used 'Xreading'?
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
7. What area(s) do you think improved? (You can choose more than one area.)
  - Reading
  - Vocabulary
  - Grammar
  - General Understanding
  - Listening
  - Nothing
8. Do you read more books than the teacher asks you to?
  - Always
  - Often
  - Sometimes
  - Rarely
  - Never
9. Do you choose books that are easier than your level?
  - Always
  - Often
  - Sometimes
  - Rarely
  - Never
10. How do you like to read a graded reader (book)?
  - Book
  - PC/Mac
  - Tablet
  - Smartphone

## Appendix B

2018 Faculty of Global and Community Studies: English Reading 2: Term 4: Questionnaire 2

This is an anonymous questionnaire. Your answers will be used for to improve future lesson and for research by Daniel James. The results will not be shared with anyone else nor will they be shared with any outside person or group.

1. Are you male or female?
  - Female
  - Male
  - Prefer not to say
  - Other
2. Do you enjoy reading?
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
3. Do you enjoy reading in English?
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
  -
4. Do you think reading English will improve your reading skills?
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
  -
5. In the first 4 weeks of this term, how many times have you used 'Xreading'?
  - Never
  - 1-5 Times
  - 6-10 Times
  - 11-15 Times
  - 16-20 Times
  - More than 20 Times
6. Do you think your English skills improved because you used 'Xreading'?
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
7. What area(s) do you think improved? (You can choose more than one area.)
  - Reading
  - Vocabulary
  - Grammar
  - General Understanding
  - Listening
  - Nothing
8. Do you read more books than the teacher asks you to?
  - Always
  - Often
  - Sometimes
  - Rarely
  - Never
9. Do you choose books that are easier than your level?
  - Always
  - Often
  - Sometimes
  - Rarely
  - Never
10. How do you like to read a graded reader (book)?
  - Book
  - PC/Mac
  - Tablet
  - Smartphone
11. Which of the classroom activities did you enjoy the most? (Choose ONE)

Speed Reading Exercises (reading against the clock & answering questions)

Making your own questions from a passage in the textbook

SSR (Sustained Silent Reading=10~15 minutes quiet reading at the end of the lesson)

11a. Please say why you liked the activity in question 11.

12. Are you likely to continue using 'Xreading' next year?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree