# Successful Users of Xreading: Toward a Million Words

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This paper reports on successful users of Xreading in one context. It considers students who used it within Supplementary Extensive Reading (SER) programs and refers to triangulated data (interviews, performance data, and questionnaire results) in investigating and hypothesizing on criteria for success within one institutional context. Focusing on ten students and three case studies, it includes reference to a 2nd-year student from the lowest stream who read 570,000 words outside of classroom conditions in four months by the end of August 2019.

To be successful, an ER program depends on external factors that are specific to a context. The principles put forward by Day and Bamford (2002) may have led many to success, but there is "no one-size-fits-all style of extensive reading" (Bieri, 2018, p. 292). Success, we can safely say, depends on having motivated students, on motivated teachers, and may also depend on opportunities for students to use English on and off-campus, which may vary according to whether students major in English or in subjects other than English. When ER is practiced within class time, whatever type of ER a teacher uses, teachers have the choice to control the conditions. When it is used as a supplementary extensive reading (SER) course component, however, and is practiced outside of the classroom, we cannot control the conditions and the situation is unclear. Success in SER depends on a wider and comparatively uncontrolled context. It may be that students who practice SER outside of the classroom, in institutions rich with English-medium clubs and courses, will regard it as less attractive or as less important as those who practice SER in institutions without such favorable conditions.

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## Context

Based on conversations with students in the author's workplace, it seems that, outside of class time, making money intensively is perceived as more important than reading books extensively. Yet Xreading (n.d.) has been used relatively successfully at Reitaku University over a few years and has generated meaningful if suggestive research that shows how, in some quarters, screen-based SER is preferable to paper-based SER (Walker, 2017; Walker, 2018). It is a workplace that has seen an increase in students practicing ER through the piloting of a standardized ER program for first-years with the online quiz platform, Mreader (Mitchell 2019; Mitchell, Sneath, and Walker, 2019). The use of Mreader makes sense in consideration of the aims, facilities, and range of courses available for English-language majors, but the program is still in a nascent stage. We look to learn from the findings of practitioners such as Koby and MacLauchlan (2018) and Koby (2019a; 2019b) and to slowly work towards getting participants to

read the sort of figures discussed in Beglar & Hunt (2014). This paper, however, concerns the successful use of Xreading in an SER program, focuses on three high achievers, and includes one participant who read over 500,000 words in four months.

### *Xreading*

Xreading is a pay-to-access screen-based learner management platform. Collett (2018) used it in a comparative study with Mreader and concluded that "assessing an extensive reading course with XR" can give slightly better outcomes than by using Mreader. Xreading's ability to assess student performance instantaneously is one reason why this author used it, firstly, as an SER self-study but graded resource from 2015 at a university in Tokyo (in reading courses for English majors), and, secondly, from 2016 at a university in Chiba (in non-reading courses for English majors). Attracted by assessment facilities that could be used to reduce cases of cheating, he was hopeful that it would increase 'one-off-reading' (Baron, 2014) for those who commute. Instructors know the exact time students log-in to do their reading, and the exact time they log-off after completing a quiz. This log-in log-out online footprint is evidence that can help to authenticate reading claims. Students can use it on smartphones or laptops on a commute, at home, or elsewhere.

## Method

A list of high-performing students was made, and, from these, ten were contacted, selected, and interviewed. Nine gave their consent for the interview to be video-recorded. All of them were informed of themes that would be covered. This included their history of interest in studying English, their use of Xreading, their use of other technologies, and their projected use of English in the future. The interviews were in English, except for the occasional use of Japanese words. Nine interviews took place

*Table 1. The Ten Interviewees*

| Student* | Course/year** | Months active | Interview date |
|---|---|---|---|
| One (m) | Writing 1/2 top (2015-16) | 2 | 11/03/19 |
| Two (m) | Writing 1/2 top (2015-16) | 2 | 12/03/19 |
| Three (f) | Writing 1/2 top (2015-16) | 2 | 20/03/19 |
| Four (f) | Writing 1/2 top (2016-17) | 6 | 09/04/19 |
| Five (m) | Writing 1/2 top (2016-17) | 6 | 12/03/19 |
| Six (m) | Comm 3/4 lowest (2018-19) | 6 | 13/03/19 |
| Seven (m) | Comm 3/4 lowest (2018-19) | 6 | 20/03/19 |
| Eight (m) | Comm 3/4 lowest (2018-19) | 5 | 11/04//19 |
| Nine (f) | Comm 3/4 lowest (2018-19) | 6 | 10/04/19 |
| Ten (f) | Comm 3/4 lowest (2019-20) | 3 | 31/07/19 |

* Student names have been changed to numbers.

** Course and year: Writing 1/2 top (the highest level first years); Comm 3/4 lowest = English Communication (lowest level second years).

in Spring 2019 and one in July 2019. Table 1 provides information for all of them and includes an allocated number for each participant, the course they were enrolled in, the number of months they used it actively, and the interview date.

## Findings

### *Shared Motivations*

In the interviews, several students said they had been attracted by the university's study abroad programs, and four had noted that a teacher at their high school had recommended it for this reason. Initially, these students did not have a strong motivation to study abroad, but interest grew as a result of campus-based activities. After they made a firm decision to study abroad, they saw Xreading as a resource to help them review basic language and assist in language acquisition. Student One to Student Five in Table 1 all studied abroad in their second year. Three of the ten stated that they had wanted to enroll in another university, but for different reasons they could not do so. They settled in their first year and took advantage of the range of opportunities to use English, including the use of Xreading. Two other students noted that they liked to read low-level books (e.g. the Oxford Reading Tree books) on Xreading in privacy, and that they wouldn't have done so had they used the campus library. The convenience of reading such texts on a smartphone, and the privacy they believed it afforded them, attracted them to choose such books on Xreading. None of the ten lived on or near the campus. All commuted long distances.

#### *Awareness of Future Possibilities*

Because of their commutes, the ten were extremely busy and wanted to use time productively. Three of them said they voluntarily wrote in a private journal and that Xreading had not interfered with this. None of them had a regular part-time job, but a few had some light club responsibilities on campus. Their mindset was focused on future goals. When using Xreading, Student Four (see Table 1) was preparing to study in North America, Student Eight on strengthening his English proficiency to qualify to do a teacher-training course, and Student Ten had a dream of becoming a translator. Student Four had been thwarted in her wish to study at another institution and took every opportunity to use time well.

### *Case Studies*

Table 2 shows basic data for three students from Table 1 who performed particularly well. Student Four had enrolled in the highest-level writing class. She read fewer books than the other two, but read a higher average number of words per book than them. Her comprehension quiz score was the highest. Student Eight read more slowly than fellow Communication class student,

*Table 2. Three High-Achieving Students.*

| Student | No. of books read | No. of words read (avg. per book) | Avg. reading speed | Avg. quiz score |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Four | 26 in 6 months | 160,314 (6412) | 97 wpm | 93% |
| Eight | 59 in 4 months | 86,823 (1930) | 74 wpm | 63% |
| Ten | 323 in 3 months | 371,735 (1150) | 122 wpm | 82% |

Student Ten, but had a higher average word count per book than Student Ten, who read the most books and at a faster speed.

***Student Four***

Student Four had been initially motivated to use English by her parents. They encouraged her to read classic English literature in Japanese, and on Xreading she read classic titles such as Anne of Green Gables, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Les Misérables, and The Elephant Man. She had wanted to attend a different university, and, when given the opportunity on the SER program, read 26 classic stories in approximately six months. The average length of books she read was 6,412 words, which was more than any first-year at that time. She began in April 2016 with the Oxford University Press Level 4 version of Aladdin and moved to Level 6 books by October. She liked Xreading because she claimed to be quickly bored, and the routine of reading in short sessions while commuting worked for her. Like the other successful students, she didn't participate in club activities. She decided early in her first-year to study in North America in her second-year. As well as its convenience, the uniqueness of Xreading attracted her. She said, "I'd never read books on smartphones. It was convenient. (and) My classmates didn't think ER was so important. They didn't want to be forced to read outside class and (course) homework. Most had other responsibilities." Unlike Student Four, the other students did not plan to study abroad. Neither did they follow my advice to read at least one book a week. She did and, when she returned from North America, she scored 895 in her final TOEIC test. Notably, in the interview, she said she had never used standard test preparation materials before a TOEIC test.

***Student Eight***

Student Eight used Xreading when in the lowest level second-year communication class, and used it because he was determined to improve his English language ability to reach a level that would allow him to take an on-campus teacher training course. Unlike Student Four, he read books that were not overtly literary in origin: they were graded reader originals written for the ELT market. Xreading suited him because he didn't have a part-time job, commuted for three hours a day, and had an intrinsic desire to improve his reading speed for test-taking purposes. He had no desire to study abroad, but was self-driven and started to use Xreading every week. For some weeks he read on several consecutive days, and, in the interview, he said that he liked to 'kill time' with it while improving his reading skills. In over four months he read 60 books from which he answered 44 quizzes satisfactorily. While using it, there was no major change in his reading speed except for his reading at a slightly slower speed with higher-level books. In comparison with Student Four, his reading was 'one-off' (Baron, 2014); he read books in full while traveling to and from campus. Most were read between six and nine o'clock in the morning. For example, he started reading the level 5 text, The Long Tunnel (MacMillan), at 08:11 one morning, and completed it at 08:42, just before the first class of the day. After reading on and off during term time, he read his final book on November 8, 2018. It took him 17 minutes 45 seconds at a speed of 71 words per minute between 06:48 and 07:06. His quiz scores show that he understood it. After surpassing the SER reading target set for his class, he opted not to use Xreading for the final months of the semester.

Some may find such detailed facts unnecessary and even disturbing, but in an

academic community rife with accusations of dishonesty (Tagane et al, 2018), such a facility can help us to authenticate whether student claims are truthful or not. As shown by Bieri (2015), it is known that paper-based reports and Mreader quizzes can be cheated on, but because Xreading records the exact time a student reads, it can help us to verify performances.

In Xreading, it is theoretically possible for a user to cheat by getting higher-proficiency students to read for them, and an instructor needs to find ways to prevent this. This is easier when ER is used in a classroom, but in SER scenarios the teacher must talk with students about their reading record. With the data calculated and saved by Xreading, a teacher and student can talk face-to-face. This is what the author did, and all of these ten students effectively explained their reading patterns and the books they read. There was a clear pattern of usage which they could credibly explain and which was backed-up by improvements in other performance-based measurements. Student Eight convincingly explained why he almost always read in the early morning, and Student Ten enjoyed talking about her nightly routine: where she uses Xreading after writing in a paper-based diary.

***Student Ten***

Student Eight was in the lowest level group in 2018-2019, and Student Ten is from the same level. Her use of Xreading has been one with high discipline and regularity. She tended to use it intensively on some days, even reading 33 books in one day, but she settled into reading a book at a certain time in the evening. For an SER program at this university, it is an unprecedented display of reading, and, ashamedly, I didn't anticipate that this lowest-level English major student, who in the Communication course had seemed unwilling or unable to communicate, would read over half a million words in just under four months. She is an outlier, for sure, but with a record that can instruct and inspire future students and teachers on what is possible in an SER program. Students Four and Eight read in a manner resembling a very well-run ER program, but Student Ten took it to another level in a reading adventure that took off in mid-May 2019 and continued after the summer vacation.

Her success was unexpected because she only scored 280 in her first-year TOEIC score. Her strongly introverted and reserved character did not suggest someone who would move from Oxford Reading Tree books to graded reader adaptations of classic texts. She emerged from a very different environment than already-literary Student Four but had something in common with her: Student Ten ignored the use of TOEIC materials in favor of extensively reading graded readers in English. She said that Xreading played a significant part in an increase of 250 points from her first-year TOEIC score in a test taken in her second year. Anecdotal but discernible improvements - in vocabulary tests, paragraph writing, and, less so, in speech - that were reported by at least three teachers is testament to the benefits ER afforded her. Extensive reading is only one factor in her development. All of her teachers played a part in her choice to read extensively, take advantage of Xreading, and make such rapid improvement.

In the July 2019 interview, Student Ten informed me of a desire to become a translator. She saw this as an unlikely dream after being assigned to the lowest class level. This failure may have been a blessing in disguise as the lowest-level was the only place Xreading was offered for second-years. She found it conducive for self-study, and in not having a regular part-time job or campus club responsibilities, she gave it

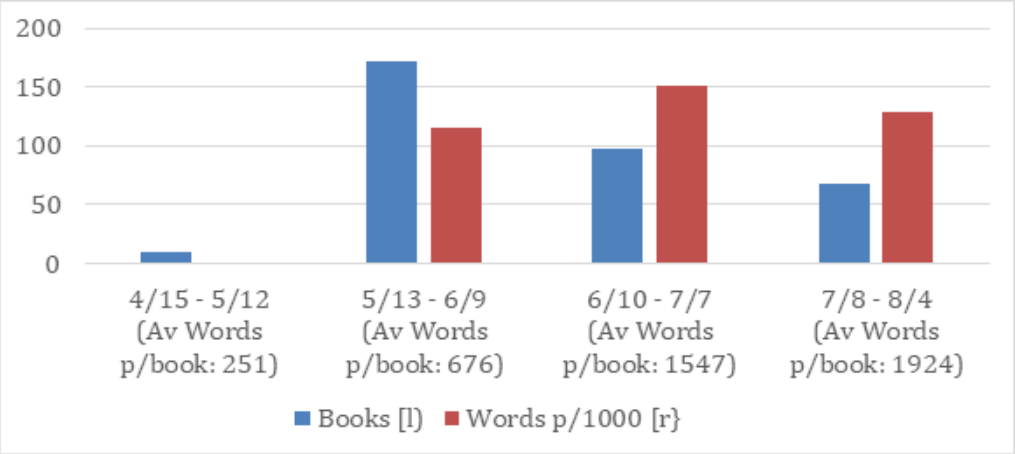


*Figure 1. Student Ten: Books read and average words per month*

a prominent place in her schedule. In the interview, she spoke about her long-term practice of diary writing in the evening which continued after she started to use Xreading. By late July 2019, she had read over 400,000 words in three months, scored an average of 80% in comprehension scores, and her reading speed had already improved.

Student Ten started to use Xreading in April 2019, together with the rest of her class. Figure 1 shows that for the first month she read ten books from mid-April to mid-May. Between May 13 and June 9, however, she read 172 books and a total of 116,000 words. She read fewer books from June to July but those that she read were of a higher word count. By August 4 she had read 465,000 words in total. Despite reading more, Figure 2 shows that her comprehension quiz score remained around 80%.

Figure 2 extends her reading record to the end of August. All the students in her class had been given the option of reading throughout the summer. By the end of August, she had continued to gradually

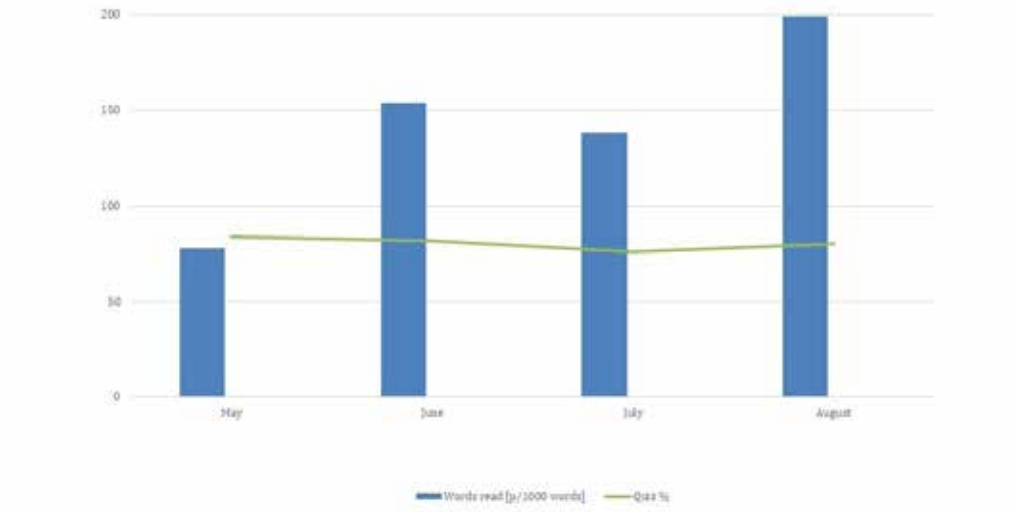

*Figure 2. Student Ten: Thousands of words read and average quiz score*

increase the average number of words per book, and as the figure shows she read 200,000 words in August alone. In this month, she was reading books that were of a slightly lower average word length than in the previous month. The reading was more comfortable and, as a consequence, she is expected to be acquiring partially-acquired words while automizing her lower-level reading skills. This heavy use of Xreading was rare. Other students had the opportunity to use it heavily, but comparatively speaking, they suffered from a light-user syndrome. Interestingly, their later improvements in TOEIC test scores were far lower than that of Student Ten.

Though not shown in the figures, Student Ten read for 51 consecutive days from May 17 to July 6. This amounted to 260 (low level) books and one day in which she read 33 books. In July, she read for all but five days. In August she read every day. While this occurred, her reading speed increased. Figure 3 shows that as she read fewer (higher level) books, her words read per minute (wpm) increased.

Figures 1 and 2 show that Student Ten read an increased average number of words, and Figure 3 also shows that her reading speed was rising. She maintained an average score of above 80% throughout this time. The fact that her reading speed steadily rose while she slowly chose books of higher book levels and higher word counts makes her progression seem like a textbook case. Everything is improving, and she did this on her own. The only thing falling is the number of books read! In addition, though it is beyond the scope of this paper to present in detail, the author has seen Student Ten continue extensive reading at a similar rate in the second semester.

## Conclusion

Student Ten is an outlier but her behavior shares patterns and themes with other successful users of Xreading in this SER context. Such students have a deep desire to integrate

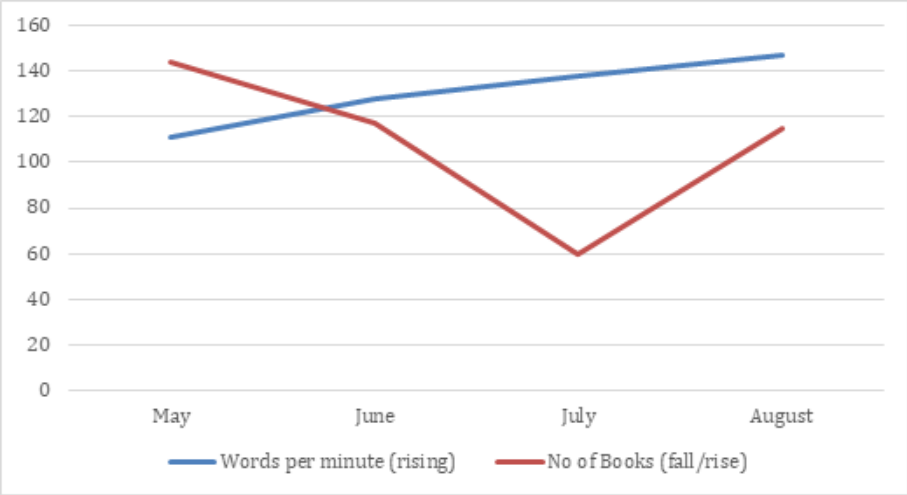


*Figure 3. Student Ten: Reading Speed vs. Number of Books Read*

ER into a schedule in which they commonly commute to and from campus and in which they have few campus-based obligations outside of classes. Successful users appear to be more aspirational than the average user, they are more academically-inclined, and more intent on taking active measures towards self-improvement. They are self-driven, and, in the case of the students focused upon, interviews have verified their Xreading reading records. Xreading is a product that will produce many successful students in ER and SER programs. It is suited to all contexts but may hold particular importance in contexts that lack access to large stores of paper-books and in which students have less competition from other English language clubs. It is one of many platforms that students can use but is perhaps one that presently best suits the needs of students who wish to fully attain the benefits ER can offer. The performance of students such as Student Four, Eight, and Ten may be far from unusual in many contexts in years to come.

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