Online support systems for extensive reading: Managing the tension between autonomy and institutional education

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In recent years in Japan a number of online systems have been developed to support extensive reading (ER) programmes. This paper discusses why so many similar systems have been developed concurrently. It is suggested that the underlying reason concerns the tension between autonomy and institutional education. Extensive reading programmes provide considerable opportunities for the development of autonomy. Educational institutions, however, may be uncomfortable with autonomy, particularly with regards to the monitoring and evaluation of students. The various online support systems make monitoring simple for teachers while imposing little on learners, and can thus help to resolve this tension. By helping to satisfy the demands of institutions, the systems allow ER practitioners to give learners the freedom to read independently. Online ER support systems may thus allow extensive reading to flourish within the constraints of institutional education.

最近、国内で多読(ER)プログラム用のオンラインシステムが多く開発されている。本論では、同じようなシステムが同時に数多く開発される理由を検討する。根本的な理由は、自律と学校教育との緊張を懸念しているからであると考えられる。ERプログラムは自律の発達に重要な機会を提供する。しかし教育機関は自律学習に対し、特に学生のモニタリングや評価という点で不安感を持つかもしれない。様々なオンラインサポートシステムは、学習者にはほとんど負担をかけずに、教員が行うモニタリングを簡略化し、この懸念を解決するのに役立つ。このようなシステムは教育機関の要求を満たすのに役立ち、ER専門家は学習者に自主的に読む自由を提供できる。このようにオンラインERサポートシステムは、学校教育の制約内でも多読の普及を助ける可能性がある。

Extensive reading (ER), the reading of large amounts of self-selected material at a level comfortable for the learner, has seen remarkable growth in Japan in the last few years. Recent conferences have seen large numbers of presentations on ER, Japan-based journals and newsletters frequently feature articles on all aspects of ER, in 2008 JALT's own Extensive Reading special interest group was established and 2011 saw the country hosting the first Extensive Reading World Congress. Another indicator of this increasing interest in ER is the local development of a number of online systems designed to support ER programmes. These systems can be seen as a response to the practical difficulties that implementers of ER face, in particular the issue of monitoring students' reading. This issue arises from the tensions between ER, autonomy, and institutional education, and this paper begins by looking in detail at these tensions. It then introduces six online support systems for ER and gives an overview of their features, discussing how they can help in easing the organisational challenges of an ER programme.

Extensive reading and autonomy

Extensive reading has strong links with the idea of autonomy. Many ER practitioners are interested not only in encouraging learners to read as much as possible during their time together, but also in helping learners to become independent readers: They seek to create "an environment that nurtures a lifelong reading habit" (Renandya, 2007, p. 135). Practitioners thus often consider the fostering of autonomy to be one of the many positive effects of ER, with Maley (2008) claiming that "there is no cheaper or more effective way" (p. 47). Curiously,

while autonomy is often mentioned by practitioners of ER, the opposite is not the case: Commentators on autonomy seldom mention ER.

To further explore the links between ER and autonomy, each must be more fully defined. Extensive reading refers to the reading of large amounts of material, the level of which is comfortable for the learner, and which learners choose themselves. Individual ER programmes of course differ, and one element of this definition may be given greater emphasis, but the three elements of quantity, ease, and choice will usually be present in some form. Autonomy is "the capacity to take control of one's learning" (Benson, 2001, p. 47). It is considered an attribute of the learner, not of a method, approach, or classroom practice. Thus, the literature talks of learners developing autonomy or becoming more autonomous, not of a method or approach involving autonomy. What can be said of approaches or practices is that they may foster autonomy by providing opportunities for its development (Benson, 2001; Little, 1991).

Turning to the links between the two, Littlewood (1996) discusses two components of autonomy: Learners must have the ability to act autonomously and they must have the motivation and confidence to do so. Benson (2001) adds a third: that learners must have the opportunity to act autonomously. I would contend that many ER programmes provide for the development of autonomy as these three components are present. First, the ability to read autonomously is fostered by an orientation to the reading materials and to the thinking behind the programme. The intention is to help learners gain the skills and knowledge necessary regarding finding suitable material and choosing material of interest to them. Furthermore, the very act of reading a lot gradually increases the learners' ability to read independently. Second, the motivation and confidence to read is fostered by the ease of the materials used. Many learners hold negative views of reading until experiencing ER, and find it very motivating to discover materials that allow them to read with confidence. In addition, many ER programmes include discussion or interaction to deepen enjoyment of the books and provide a mutually supportive and positive environment for reading. Finally, the opportunity is provided as learners have the freedom to choose what they read and to decide when, where, how often, and how much they read. Naturally, different ER programmes will foster autonomy to a greater or lesser extent, but many ER programmes share these features and thereby provide rich opportunities for the development of autonomy.

Autonomy and institutional education

Extensive reading thus seems to be a potentially important means of fostering autonomy. However, the threads of autonomous learning that run through ER can cause problems within institutional education. Benson (2001) suggests that while educational authorities are often enthusiastic about the idea of autonomy at a broad level, they are less enthusiastic when it comes to actual power being transferred to learners. Autonomy is often more aspired to than the object of concrete action.

The reasons for this lie perhaps in part in the origins of the idea of autonomy. One source is the work of radical educational thinkers such as Dewey, Freire, and Illich, many of whom explicitly attacked institutional education (Benson, 2001; Benson & Voller, 1997). A second is the political concept of autonomy, which involves challenging authority and established power structures (Benson, 1997; Pennycock, 1997). While these ideas are usually in the background of work on autonomy in language education, the anti-authoritarian, anti-institutional streak within the idea of autonomy may be one reason for the unease shown towards it.

One particular area of tension between autonomy and institutional education is assessment. Assessment and evaluation have been key themes in writings on autonomy going right back to Holec (1981), who established the idea of autonomy in the field of language teaching. Examinations in particular are seen as antithetical to autonomy. Little (2007) states that "the constraints imposed by tests and examinations have long been recognised as one of the greatest systemic obstacles to the successful pursuit of language learner autonomy on a large scale" (p. 12). Holec suggested that any form of assessment besides self-assessment was invalid for autonomous learning, and Breen and Mann (1997) describe the psychological impact of assessment as the learner's own intrinsic sense of worth is

eroded and replaced by an external, publicly judged sense. Assessment and grading, and often external assessment, are, however, part of the very essence of institutional education. As Benson (2001) notes, many accounts in the autonomy literature of learner control over assessment describe isolated events and self-assessment for certification purposes is extremely rare.

Institutional education and extensive reading

Extensive reading, as an approach that may foster freedom and independence, can thus come into conflict with institutional education. As Maley (2008) says:

> [There is a] paradox inherent in the intersection of the essentially private, free activity of reading with the institutional constraints implicit in public systems of education. Reading in the sense of ER is not amenable to the kinds of control so beloved by institutions. (p. 136)

One problem may be "that a class of students reading silently is not perceived as a class learning, let alone being taught, both by the students themselves and the school administration" (Prowse, 2002, p. 144). Extensive reading requires a redefinition of the roles of both teachers and learners, which the educational authorities, the learners, and the teachers may be uncomfortable with at first (Day & Bamford, 1998; Renandya & Jacobs, 2002).

Perhaps the key issue, however, is assessment. Most institutions demand the assessment and grading of students, and that this be reasonably transparent and justifiable. However, the elements of autonomous learning in ER make its assessment an extremely challenging task. It is difficult, first, in terms of logistics. Many learners reading many books makes for a time-consuming administrative task for teachers even if they choose the most minimal system of monitoring. Second, while there are dissenting voices (see Robb, 2002), the emphasis in the ER literature is usually on the intrinsic rewards of reading itself rather than the extrinsic rewards of grades. Day and Bamford (2002), for example, include among their ten principles of ER that the purpose of reading should be enjoyment, that reading should be its own reward, and that learners should not be tested on their reading. Davis (1995) actually defines ER as a scheme in which "pupils are given

the time, encouragement, and materials to read pleasurably, at their own level, as many books as they can, *without the pressure of testing or marks* [italics added]" (p. 329). For Davis, monitoring is useful, but only in order to motivate learners. Renandya and Jacobs (2002) concur: "monitoring should be seen as a way of displaying student progress and motivating students, rather than as a way for the teacher to *assess* them" (p. 298). The unfortunate situation, however, is that "most of us have to assess the students in some way, even though we know it may be detrimental to their enjoyment of reading" (Fenton-Smith, 2008, p. 905). Third, and related to the above point, we need systems of assessment that do not create negative backwash, pulling learners in unwanted directions. The system should not give learners an incentive to read books at an inappropriate level, make cheating or dishonesty a temptation, nor impose an onerous task on the learners which discourages them from reading more. An ideal system would in fact push learners in a positive direction, towards reading more at an appropriate level while not imposing on their choices. This, I believe, is the backdrop to the development of the six online systems introduced here.

The systems

The online systems discussed below are all meant to support the practice of extensive reading. None of the six systems actually provide reading material. Rather, the systems provide a space where students can maintain a record of their reading, and make these records easily accessible to the teacher. The six systems are all similar in that students log in individually and register the books they have read, usually graded readers, in some way. Each is briefly introduced below.

- The *Interactive Reading Community* (Mizuno, 2006) began over a decade ago as a bulletin board application, and has evolved to become a free-standing website. Developed by an individual university teacher, it is meant to be used in conjunction with class activities. The system aims to build a reading community among learners and to help them discover the joy of reading. It thus focuses on interaction among learners and between learners and their books.

- The *Moodle Reader Quiz Module* (Robb, 2009) has been developed at Kyoto Sangyo University as a plug-in module for the Moodle course-management system. It is intended to be used by learners with almost no intervention from teachers, and thus allow a curriculum-wide implementation of ER. It focuses on whether learners have really read the books they claim to have read by testing them on their content. The system is available for other teachers or institutions to use.

- *Booktests* (Stewart, 2008) has been developed by an individual high school teacher and is meant to be used in conjunction with class activities. It is also Moodle-based and again uses short tests to check whether students have really read their books. It is available to others through its developer.

- *Librarything* is a US-based commercial social networking website for book lovers. Though not designed to support ER nor intended for use with language learners, I have made use of the site with my students for several years (Brown, 2009). The site eases the administrative difficulty of monitoring students' reading, and can help to motivate students to read more. I use it in conjunction with class activities. The website is free to use up to a limit of 200 registered books.

- The *Extensive Reading System* (Brierley, Wakasugi, & Sato, 2009; M. Brierley, personal communication, July 15, 2010) is a free-standing website developed at Shinshu University in a collaboration between language teachers and postgraduate engineering students. It is meant to ease the difficulty of monitoring learners' reading and the management of the graded reader library, as well as to motivate learners to read more.

- *XReading* (P. Goldberg, personal communication, May 25, 2009) has been developed by a university teacher and is a free-standing website. It provides short tests to check if students have truly read their books. Students can take the tests online or through their mobile phones, or, after students have registered the books read, the teacher can print out the appropriate tests to take to class. XReading is a commercial site and requires a subscription.

Table 1. Features of the systems

	Interactive Reading Community	Moodle Reader Quiz Module	Booktests	Librarything	Extensive Reading System	XReading
Teachers can see a list of learners showing the amount of reading reported.	X	O	O	X	O	O
Each learner can see a visual display of the books they have registered.	O	O	X	O	O	X
Learners can take tests on books.	X	O	O	X	X	O
Learners can write reviews of books.	O	X	X	O	O	X
Learners can write comments for each other.	O	X	X	O	O	X
Learners can find other books of interest to them.	O	X	X	O	O	O

Note. The table only includes features that are an active part of the systems themselves. For example, the Moodle Reader Quiz Module provides no means for students to write comments to each other, though this can easily be provided using other parts of the Moodle system. Please also note that the systems are undergoing continuous development and thus features may be added or altered.

Table 1 gives a simple overview of the systems' features. As shown, four of the systems provide teachers with details of the progress of a class of students on a single page. Second, most of the systems provide learners with some kind of visual display of the books registered and thus the amount of reading completed. In most cases this means showing the covers of the books, but the Extensive Reading System goes further with a tree graphic which slowly grows as learners read more. The other four features in the table seem to reflect certain differences between the various developers regarding the aims of ER. Some systems include tests of individual books, thus focusing on making sure the learners read. The other systems, through the use of reviews, comments and facilities for finding books of interest, seem more concerned with helping learners develop

an interest in reading. Regarding finding books of interest, Librarything minimally facilitates this by enabling students to read each other's reviews and to read all the reviews for a particular book, while XReading provides profiles of graded readers. The Interactive Reading Community and the Extensive Reading System, however, go further with Amazon-style recommendation systems where books are recommended to users based on all users' records. The differing perspectives between the test-based systems and the review-based systems can be seen as reflecting more realist and more idealist views of learners and of what ER can achieve, and individual teachers no doubt differ in their preference for one perspective or the other. This author's view, as is perhaps clear, is that independence is better served by avoiding testing. However, it should be noted that the way in which a system is used by a teacher is probably more important than the actual system itself.

There are, then, differences between the systems, but they also share many features. In particular, all the systems simplify the considerable administrative task of monitoring learners' reading, and indeed this was the chief motivation for the development of many of the systems. As suggested above, I believe that this is a central concern because of the degree of independence that ER makes possible, which creates tensions in institutional contexts of education. Practitioners of ER in institutions that require assessment and grading desire methods of assessment that make administration simple, maintain the focus on reading, and put as few obstacles in the way of reading as possible. This is what the online support systems for ER seem to do.

The systems make administration easier for teachers by removing the need to chase trails of paper around and, in many cases, by showing an entire class's progress on a single screen. The logistics of monitoring students is also made easier by the accessibility of the systems. Students can access them at school, from home or indeed any computer and at any time. Teachers likewise have instant access to up-to-date records allowing continuous monitoring of students' progress.

The systems maintain the focus on reading by making the task of recording what has been read simple. Accessibility plays a part in this, but the recording task itself is kept simple. The

test-based systems use simple tests of the books, taking just a few minutes. The review-based systems focus on short reviews that emphasize reactions to the books. These systems also, because of their community-building aim, encourage accountability among the students in terms of writing reviews and reactions to the books that will be useful to their peers.

The online systems are also useful in terms of monitoring for the purpose of motivating students, rather than for assessment alone. Besides providing each student with a record of their progress, thus allowing students to monitor themselves, the continuous tracking of what students are reading, and, depending on the system, either how much they understand or how much they are enjoying the books, allows teachers to pinpoint individuals who may be having problems. Stewart (2008) in particular discusses how his Booktests system helps him identify students who are not reading much, who may be reading at the wrong level, or who seem not to be enjoying their reading, thus allowing him to individually counsel such students. Students who are not used to reading, sometimes in the L1 as well as in the L2, often need considerable guidance to get started with reading. Other students may start strongly but gradually lose enthusiasm over time. A primary role for practitioners of ER is to build and maintain learners' interest in reading, and by removing some of the administrative burden, the systems make it easier for teachers to give their attention where it is most needed.

Conclusion

The six online extensive reading support systems introduced here are the fruit of a great deal of effort. I have suggested that the root of all this effort is the tension that exists between the substantial opportunities for the development of autonomy that ER provides and the constraints of institutional education. In particular, the requirement to assess and grade students causes considerable difficulties for practitioners of ER. The online support systems for ER seem to offer a way out of this conundrum. By simplifying the monitoring of learners, the online systems make it easier for teachers to satisfy the demands of their institutions, while still allowing learners the autonomy to read how, when, where, and what they like.

Online ER support systems can thus remove one of the barriers that may prevent the adoption of ER and make it easier for ER to flourish within the constraints of institutional education.

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