Introduction to M-Reader:
An Online Extensive Reading Aid for Schools

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ABSTRACT

M-reader is a free Internet site which helps educational institutions to manage extensive reading (ER). It enables teachers to verify that students have read and understood graded reader books. This is achieved by students taking online quizzes designed to test their understanding of a book's plot and characters, rather than how well they remember the book. Teachers and students can easily track the number of books and the number of words read. M-reader, established with the help of research funds from Kyoto Sangyo University in Japan and the Japanese Ministry of Education, was first made available online in March 2013 and is now used by educational institutions in 26 countries. In numerous contexts, teachers would like to conduct additive ER (extensive reading done outside of class time). Additive ER can only be widely used if effective measures are taken to ensure student accountability without overloading teachers or taking too much class time. M-reader meets these conditions. It also allows modification of several parameters to suit the needs of students. This paper outlines some principles of extensive reading, introduces the functions of M-reader, and reports students' perceptions of M-reader during a pilot program for M-reader in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) classes at a private university in Tokyo. The authors hope that this paper can be used as a reference for English language teachers who are considering using M-reader to manage their extensive reading program.

KEYWORDS: CALL, ELF, extensive reading, M-reader, reading comprehension

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Introduction

"Good things happen to students who read a great deal in the new language." (Bamford & Day, 2004, p. 1). Reflecting these words, the last decade has seen a rapid increase in ER in foreign language programs (Brown, 2012). A growing body of research advocates the implementation of ER in foreign language programs. Nakanishi (2015), for example, conducted a meta-analysis of 34 research studies in ER concluding that, "extensive reading improves students' reading proficiency and should be a part of language learning curricula" (p.6). Further, Beglar, Hunt and Kite (2012) claim in an empirical study claimed that ER is more effective than other approaches - such as intensive reading - for enhancing reading skill development among foreign language learners. In pursuit of this goal, in many cases, students are required to read graded reader books outside of class time (additive ER).

However, teachers considering the use of additive ER express pedagogical concerns about being able to judge how thoroughly students have completed their reading, (Brown, 2012; Robb & Kano, 2013; Campbell & Weatherford, 2013) and administrative concerns about having enough time to organize ER programs or having enough class time available (Day & Bamford, 1998; Robb, 2009). M-reader, designed for use by students with minimal supervision by teachers, alleviates these problems. Moreover, it has been reported that the predecessor of M-reader, Moodle Reader, encouraged students to read significantly more and to read regularly during the semester (Robb, 2009). It can be seen that M-reader, an easier version for teachers and students to use, can be beneficial from instructional, managerial and motivational standpoints.

Background

Principles of extensive reading
Extensive reading is often thought to be best conducted according to the principles of Bamford and Day (2004) who suggest that students should select a variety of relatively easy reading material of their own choice, read as much as possible, see reading as its own reward, read faster rather than slower, read individually and silently, and be guided by the teacher who acts as a role model. When considering at which level books should be read, teachers should keep in mind the advice of Nation (2009) that a graded reader is at an appropriate level of difficulty if 95 to 98 percent of the words in the text are already familiar to the reader.

Introduction to M-reader
As a free Internet site designed to enable educational institutions to manage extensive reading effectively, M-reader helps teachers to verify that students have read and understood graded reader books. Students take online quizzes designed to test their understanding of plot and characters, rather than their memory of specific information from the book. Both teachers and students can view information on the number of books and the number of words read. M-reader was established using the research funds of Kyoto Sangyo University in Japan and the Japanese Ministry of Education. It was first made available online in March 2013 and is now used by educational institutions in 26 countries. Figure 1 shows the site where students and teachers login.

Figure 1: The M-reader login page. Retrieved from http://mreader.org.

After logging in students are taken to a personal home page, which is easily accessible to teachers, enabling both students and teachers to monitor reading progress. The page, shown in Figure 2, displays quiz outcomes, book titles and levels, and cumulative word counts.
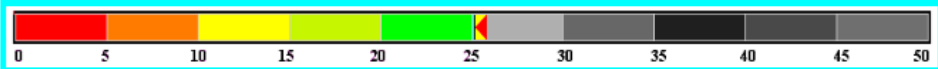
Figure 2: The M-reader user's reading progress page

Each book cover represents a quiz passed, indicating that a book has been read and comprehended to a sufficient level. Quizzes are designed not to test memory but rather understanding of the book's plot and characters. Each quiz is drawn from a bank of between 20 and 30 questions from which a student receives 10 questions at random, usually in the form of multiple choice (shown in Figure 3), "who said this?", true/ false and event ordering. In March 2014 there were over 3,700 quizzes available, according to information supplied directly to the authors by Dr. Tom Robb, who developed and maintains M-reader.
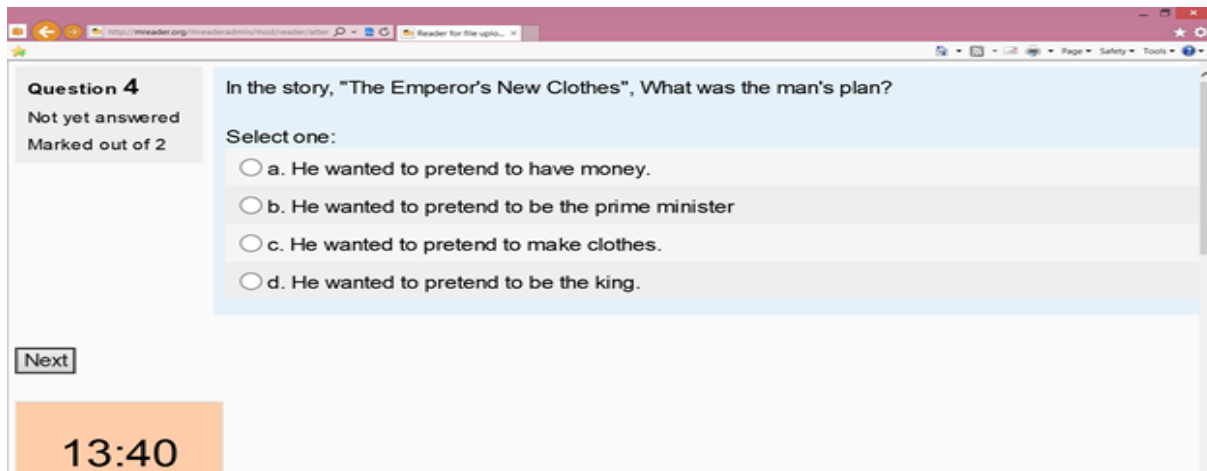
Figure 3: An M-reader quiz question with timer

How M-reader Works for Teachers and Administrators

Teachers have access to class logs, searchable by student name or date (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: The M-reader class report page

Teachers can also, if enabled by their school M-reader administrator, perform the functions displayed in Figure 5.
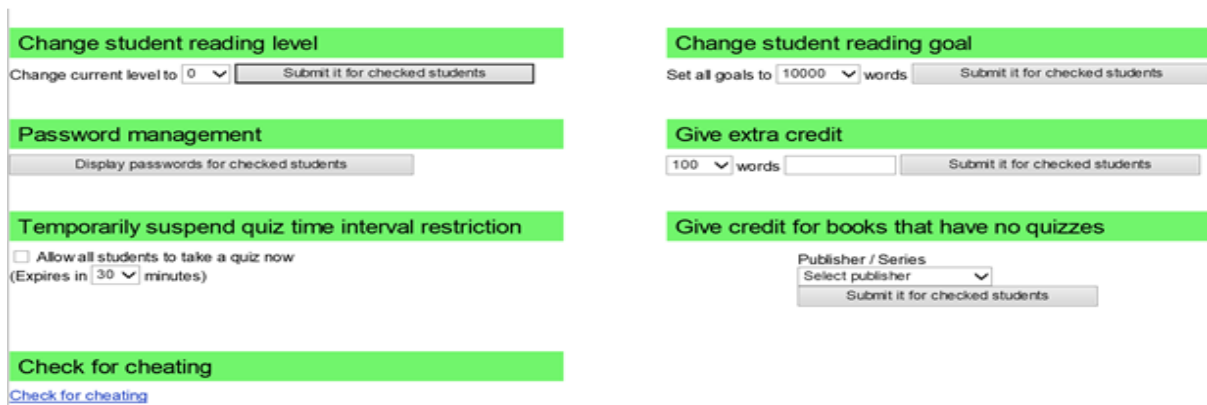

Figure 5: The M-reader customization menu

The check for cheating function is particularly useful. In cases of suspected cheating, a teacher can retrieve data quickly, and label the relevant quizzes as "pending", allowing time to approach the student(s) concerned.

Time delays between quizzes can be set so that students are not able to complete several quizzes late in the semester. This feature also serves to prevent the sharing of information about quiz question bank items between students. In a study into the use of M-reader at another Japanese university, Campbell and Weatherford (2013) reported that 80 percent of students felt that the time delay of 24 hours between quizzes was too long, yet these teachers concluded that this was probably the result of students failing to read consistently throughout the semester. With this issue in mind, the time delay function can be used to ensure students maintain a regular reading practice.

Student feedback

Late in the second semester of 2013, towards the end of the M-reader pilot at Tamagawa University, a questionnaire solicited student perceptions of the ELF program. Of the 40 questionnaire items, five were related to M-reader. A total of 78 students (65 %) responded to the M-reader items.

Table 1 provides a summary of the number of books students read during the 15-week semester. Each teacher set an extensive reading requirement to complete five books and their corresponding M-reader quizzes. Seventy-seven percent of respondents (60/78) were able to reach their targets for the semester. Furthermore, these results indicated that 51% (40/78) of respondents actually read more than five books, which may suggest that being able to select material of their own choice motivated students to read as much as possible, in keeping with the principles of Bamford and Day (2004). It needs to be noted however, that one of the two teachers in the pilot offered his students (representing approximately half of the respondents) an incentive to read more, which was that he would consider awarding a higher grade in cases where a student's final score for the semester fell just below a grade borderline and the student had read more than five books, a method suggested by Bamford and Day (2004).

Table 1
The number of books read by survey respondents during the M-reader pilot (n=78)

Number of books read	Number of students	Percentage of students
0	2	2.56%
1	3	3.85%
2	7	8.97%
3	4	5.13%
4	2	2.56%
5	20	25.64%
6	12	15.38%
7	9	11.54%
8	8	10.26%
9	2	2.56%

10	3	3.85%
More than 10	6	7.69%

Not only were some students able to read more than was expected of them, but students generally appeared to have a positive impression of the M-reader system. A majority, 59% (46/78), agreed that the system was easy to use, and 72% (56/78) agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to understand the M-reader quizzes.

Prior to this pilot, in the first semester of 2013, students had been asked to complete written book reports as part of their graded reading evaluation. Table 2 illustrates how students preferred to be kept accountable for their ER progress. Some students (38% of respondents) preferred book reports to M-reader quizzes. When students were asked to explain their preference, a number of students noted that they preferred written book reports because they were able to practice their writing skills. For example, one student said: 自分で文章を考える力をつけたいから (*I want to improve my composition skills*).
Another noted, 自分の言葉で表現する事も重要だと思ったから (*I think that it is important to develop my skill at expressing things in my own words*).

Table 2
Student responses to the statement,"I prefer M-reader quizzes to writing book reports." (n=78)

Likert Scale Response	Number of Students	Percentage of Students
Strongly Agree	19	24.36%
Agree	20	25.64%
Neutral	11	14.10%
Disagree	22	28.21%
Strongly Disagree	6	7.69%

In contrast, fifty percent of students preferred M-reader quizzes to book reports. Some students appeared to like the feedback they received on their graded reading. Examples of responses are: 本の内容を理解してるかがしっかり分かるから (*I was able to learn whether I fully understood the book's contents or not*) and 本の内容理解がM-readerを使う事でよりいっそう深まるから (*Using M-reader helped me to understand the content of the book more deeply*). A total of 19 students (13.5%) commented that they enjoyed the convenience of being able to do the M-reader quizzes. For example, students remarked that ネットでできるため、気軽に何度も利用することができた (because the quizzes were available online, I was able to work freely at my own pace), 楽な気持ちで英語の内容を読めるから (M-reader allows me to read English more freely), and 携帯から出来るので、短時間で素早く出来るのがよかった。また、やりやすかった (*As you can answer M-reader quizzes on your cellphone, you can take quizzes very quickly. Furthermore, the quizzes were easy to do*).

These findings do not necessarily contradict Campbell and Weatherford's (2013) data which revealed that students preferred book reports. The authors of that study suspected that their students had learned how to do book reports without thoroughly reading the books and that they

were also selecting books that were too difficult. Although students had very positive perceptions of the M-reader program overall, there were some students who expressed concerns when asked to comment on their experiences using this program. A total of 14 comments (18%) were categorized as negative, or critical of the M-reader component.

Some students experienced technology-related problems: *アクセスしづらい、難しい(it was difficult to access M-reader and it was hard)* and *ネットを開く手間がかかる (it took time to connect to the program)*. Also, when selecting a new book, students had to check whether the graded reader had a corresponding M-reader quiz available, and this process appeared to be a negative one for some students. For example, *M-readerにある本を探すのに時間がかかる(It took time to search for the books which had M-reader quizzes)* and *クイズがある本とない本があるので、クイズがある本を探すのが面倒臭かったです(It felt like it was a total waste of time trying to find out whether the book I wanted to read had a quiz or not).*

These comments should be interpreted in the context that teachers had directed students to log in before searching for quizzes, a step which is unnecessary. The 'view available books' tab which used to be displayed at the top of the M-reader login page (as shown in Figure 1) has since been updated to become a 'view available quizzes' tab, making it clearer to teachers and students that they need not log in to determine whether M-reader contains a quiz for a particular book. Campbell (2012) who was investigating the impact of M-reader's predecessor Moodle Reader at another private Japanese university had noted similar student concerns, which are likewise addressed by M-reader.

Concerns raised by a few students about the difficulty of the quizzes need to be considered in the context that teacher administrators were learning about M-reader system settings. A total of seven students appeared to feel the questions were too difficult. For example, *たまに難しい問題が出てくることがあったり、うまくテストが進行出来ないことがあって困った (Sometimes I would hit a difficult question while doing the quiz and it really troubled me)*, *もう少し簡単にしてほしい* (I would prefer the questions to be easier), and *頑張って読んでも点数が取れなければパスできないから (It is disappointing that even if I tried my best to read the book, I often could not get enough points to pass the quizzes).*

It should be noted that students may have been reading books too difficult for them. It is also probable that since teachers had not designated a reading level for each student, and since some books have titles (and therefore quizzes) at more than one level of difficulty, students may have been attempting quizzes designed for higher graded reader levels.

Nevertheless, one student noted *問題は難しかったがやりがいがあった (even though the questions were hard, it made me feel like this task was more worthwhile to do),* and another noted that compared to writing a book report, they were able to feel a greater sense of accomplishment after they had passed the M-reader quiz *(本を読むのに苦労して、合格したら嬉しいから. Book reportは、あまり意味ないと思う)*. Two students in the current study identified quiz question difficulty as being influential in deciding which graded reader level was the most appropriate for their extensive reading.

Concerns about quiz difficulty were also raised in the reports of Campbell (2012) and Campbell and Weatherford (2013) at other private Japanese universities. In the case of Campbell's study, the author concluded that complaints about books or quizzes being too difficult indicated that

students were reading at a level too high for them, while Campbell and Weatherford noted that students needed more guidance in how to choose an appropriate book.

Conclusion

M-reader has allowed the teachers in this ELF program to manage graded reading activity effectively in terms of both logistics and pedagogical principles. Students in this university program appeared to have positive perceptions of the M-reader system. The online system offers students convenience as well as records of their reading progress, facilitating engagement with graded reader books. The authors hope that further refining of the use of the M-reader system in the ELF curriculum will encourage students to read more, and that "good things" will continue to happen.

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