

Quizzes—A sin against the sixth commandment? In defense of MReader

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The “Ten Principles Teaching Extensive Reading” has appeared in a number of forms, initially as “The characteristics of an extensive reading approach” in Day and Bamford (1998) and later in an article in *Reading in a Foreign Language* (2002) but in a slightly different form and ordering.

What was originally intended to be a characterization of an “ideal” extensive reading (ER) approach, however, has been taken to an almost religious quality with some practitioners who firmly believe that any approach that deviates from these guidelines is not truly “extensive reading.” This, I have found, is one of the most frequent objections to using the MReader.org quiz program among teachers who have queried me about it.

In this article, I hope to show that the benefit of using a quiz program can override any objections to “follow-up activities” and there are, indeed cases where it promotes closer adherence to this principle than might have been the case without it.

An Introduction to MReader

MReader, along with its Moodle plug-in partner, the Reader module, is a program that allows students and their teachers to keep track of everyone’s reading progress, thus obviating the need for other more cumbersome and laborious measures such as book reports or summaries.

The software, as of this writing, contains a bank of over 4500 quizzes on both graded readers and ‘youth readers’ and currently has a user base of some 80,000 students in about 25 countries. Each quiz presents the student with a randomized selection of 10 items, including true/false, multiple choice, and sequencing of events, and is often completed in just 4-5 minutes. The questions are designed to be easy in order to assess whether the student has read the book or not. The quizzes are not designed to assess how deeply the book has been understood.

When students pass a quiz, their personal page shows that the quiz has been “passed” if they have gained a score above (usually) 60% but does not show the exact percentage since we as teachers do not want the students focused on obtaining a perfect score. The students also receive a copy of the book cover to add to their “stamp collection” (Figure 1). This is one of a number of game-like devices to motivate them to continue to read. Other “gamified” aspects include a

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public leaderboard, a colorful progress bar, a column that climbs toward their promotion to the next level and the ability to post their progress on Facebook.

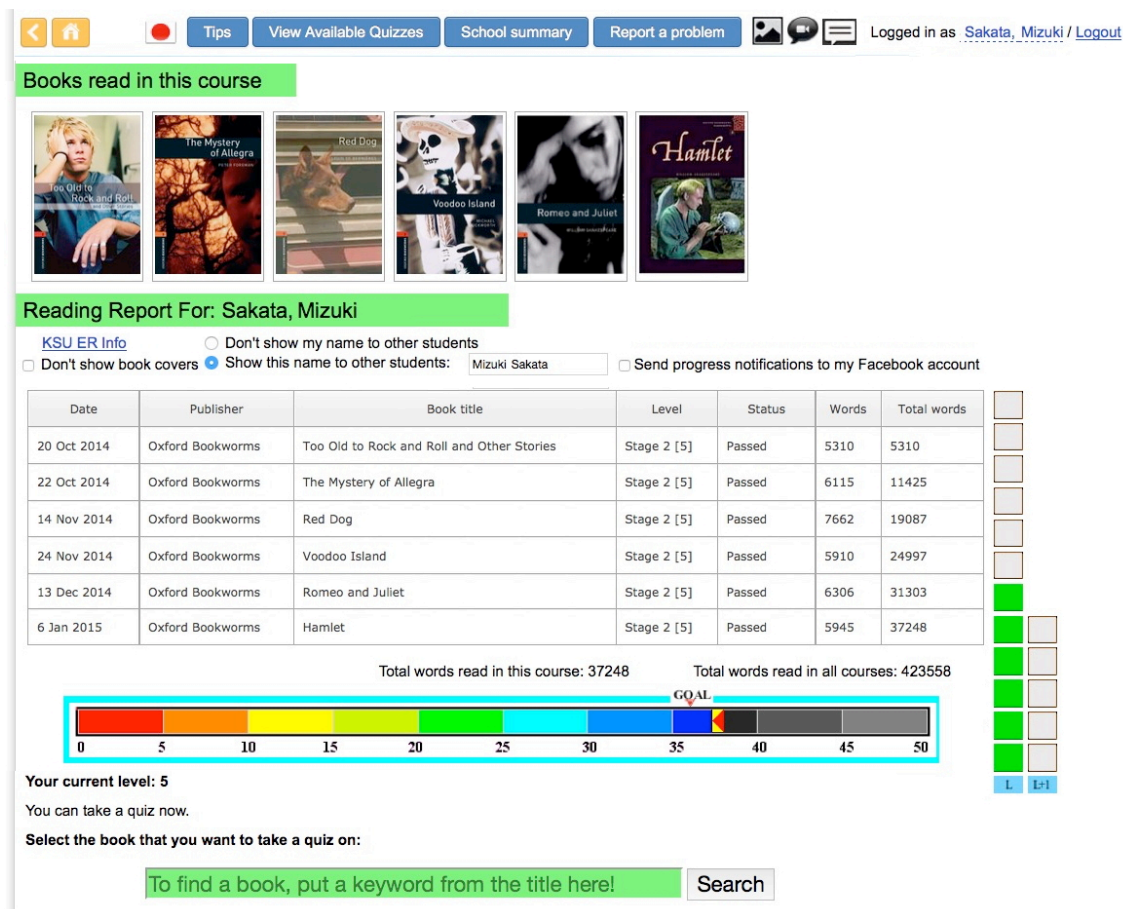


Figure 1. Stamp collection

Reading is Its own Reward

Day and Bamford (2002) elaborated on this principle, saying:

6. Reading is its own reward. The learners' experience of reading the text is at the center of the extensive reading experience, just as it is in reading in everyday life. For this reason, extensive reading is not usually followed by comprehension questions. It is an experience complete in itself. (p. 138)

Robb (2002) mentioned some of the factors that make adherence to this, and some of the other principles difficult in an Asian context. More recently, Yoshida (2014) stated,

during SSR, instructors can observe students' reading progress in every class. Principle Number 6 of Day and Bamford (1998, 2002) is that "Reading is its own reward." This may well ultimately be correct; however, it may be a long-term rather than an immediate goal. For most learners of English in Japanese universities, the instructor must make an

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intensive effort to induce them [students] to read willingly during SSR [sustained silent reading]. This requires acts of guidance such as checking students' reading and offering appropriate advice on the amount they read and their reading speed. (p. 20)

The defining factor of extensive reading is, as the name implies, reading a large volume of material with less emphasis on comprehension. Any approach that accomplishes this can be termed "extensive reading" even if it does not adhere to some or many of the principles. Waring and McLean, in this volume, discuss this issue at length.

But even before Day and Bamford, Davis (1995) had defined ER as "a supplementary class library scheme, attached to an English course, in which pupils are given the time, encouragement, and materials to read pleurably, at their own level, as many books as they can, without the pressures of testing or marks" (p. 329).

Davis, however, was not concerned with the implementation of ER in large classes, where most of the students cannot be motivated or cajoled to read without the teacher around. When ER is performed in a class setting, the instructor has visual confirmation of this fact, thus a test might invoke some of the images mentioned by Bell (1998) (images of rote learning, vocabulary lists, memorization and homework) although he provides no empirical basis for this assertion. With highly motivated students, the use of software such as MReader, is less compelling, although even here, many students appreciate the opportunity to confirm that they have understood their reading and also enjoy the stamp collection aspect of the program.

Despite Day and Bamford's interdiction, their 1998 book does contain a chapter title, "The reading community in action" in which a litany of follow-up activities are outlined. Furthermore, their second volume, Bamford and Day (2004) is replete with suggestions for follow-up activities. This writer believes, that the main point of "Reading is its own reward" rule was to counterbalance the traditional *intensive* approach where follow-up activities are *de rigueur*.

Furthermore, when such activities are conducted after the book has been completely read, then the reading has already been "an experience complete in itself." Reflections, summaries or any other kind of follow-up activity would also be vulnerable to this same criticism.

Are Quizzes Really Detrimental?

While more work in different educational settings is required, a preliminary study by Stoeckel, Reagan, and Hann (2012) concluded that,

extensive reading quizzes do not impact reading attitudes. This provides evidence contrary to the view that assessment of ER may negatively influence affect (Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2004; Waring, 1997). Indeed four factors identified in the present study (*anxiety, comfort, linguistic value* and *practical value*) were clearly unaffected by the use of quizzes and of the two factors approaching significance, one (*intellectual value*) was positively influenced. Students who took quizzes might have felt slightly greater intellectual value from the reading task. (p. 193)

Increased Motivation

Namhee Suk (a PhD student at Northern Arizona University) reported that while some students do not like MReader as much as other types of follow-up activities, students confess that they would not have reached their required reading goal for the term. (personal communication, January 6, 2015). She further mentioned that the quizzes seemed to boost the self-efficacy of a number of students.

A student who participated in Kevin Miller’s reading marathon reports, “I think this is the perfect program for raising my English ability. It was really fun, so I want to read more and take more Moodle quizzes” (Miller, 2012, p. 80).

From a student in Iran,

I really enjoyed the design of the website. The bar promoted a sense of competition....The quizzes were simple and easy which made it easy to read more books and gain knowledge in a short time, we didn’t worry about the quizzes (Sepideh Alavi, personal communication, November 14, 2014).

Controlling Student Reading Level

Principle 7 states that what the students read should be within their level of reading competence. When teachers, however, require a certain amount of ER, perhaps by the number of books read, or by a total word count, students with little motivation to read tend to find shortcuts towards this objective. If a book count is required, some will satisfy the requirement with books that are so easy that they will gain little from the experience. On the other hand, when the goal is set in total words read, students will attempt to read books that are far beyond their own level, since more difficult books typically have higher word counts.

MReader, however, measures progress only by word count, and has a function that restricts the possible quizzes that students can take to equal to or below a reading level set by the instructor or program administrator. This helps to ensure that the students’ reading does contribute to their language development.

Student Enjoyment

Brierley (2008) reported,

rather than being demotivating, however, short tests may even provide positive motivation. Reed and Goldberg (2008) found that giving a two-minute, five-item question test at the end of each book led to students reading more. This may not just be the extrinsic motivation of students socialized into working towards the test; it may even

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represent intrinsic motivation as some people like quizzes. (p. 51)

Conclusion

Under the heading “Why is extensive reading the approach less travelled”, Day and Bamford (1998) mention, among other impediments,

- The work required to set up a program
- The difficulty of finding time for it in an already crowded schedule
- The different role of the teacher

(p. 46)

MReader is one way to overcome these problem factors. While the books still need to be purchased and managed, it simplifies the set-up, allows the reading to be done outside of class (“additive” rather than “replacement” as mentioned in Robb & Kano, 2013). Furthermore, there is no change in the role of the teacher since class activities do not need to change.

This writer believes this prescriptiveness is a clear instance of theory (or perhaps a misinterpretation of the theory) getting in the way of good practice. While it certainly is desirable for students to thoroughly enjoy what they are reading without the need for follow-up activities, for the vast majority of students who could benefit from extensive reading, a lack of follow-up activities would be tantamount to no reading at all. In many school settings where students are not particularly motivated to study, some sort of tracking mechanism is required for ER, and this needs to be a method that would not add more work for the instructors. Without these conditions being met, extensive reading would not be implemented at all.

This position is supported by O’Sullivan (2012) who, when evaluating Moodlereader, the earlier implementation of MReader, stated,

The disadvantage is that the element of reading being a reward in itself is removed and for some students the testing may take away some of the joy of reading. However there is little doubt that as students have so many demands on their time such as club activity, part-time jobs and many classes, only the very motivated students would choose to read unless they are forced to. In addition, though students may dislike the test aspect, by being forced to read, many do come to enjoy it. (p. 23)

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