

Al Zeidi & Al Quraini, 2019

Volume 5 Issue 1, pp. 350-365

Date of Publication: 29th March 2019

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2019.51.350365>

This paper can be cited as: Al Zeidi, J. & Al Quraini, B., (2019). Moodle as an Extensive Reading Mechanism: A Study to Facilitate Extensive Reading in an Omani EFL Context. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(1), 350-365.

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MOODLE AS AN EXTENSIVE READING MECHANISM: A STUDY TO FACILITATE EXTENSIVE READING IN AN OMANI EFL CONTEXT

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Abstract

Extensive Reading (ER) in the English as Foreign Language (EFL) field is of paramount importance for students' academic success. For this reason, innovative teaching and testing mechanisms must be applied in extensive reading programs in order to enhance students' language learning. This paper reports on the results of a mixed methods case study of ninety-eight Level 2 EFL foundation students at Middle East College in the Sultanate of Oman. The study explored the effectiveness of a MOODLE extensive reading program in assessing students' extensive reading skills. The MOODLE program was utilized to measure students' understanding of the graded stories and to track their reading progress. Results of the quantitative data analysis indicated a substantial improvement in students' reading comprehension, number of attempts, motivation to read, and comfort, as well as a preference to the novel assessment method. Although both the standard and MOODLE assessment methods

demonstrated significant students' gains and the success of the ER program in the context of study, the MOODLE program enhanced these gains considerably.

Keywords

Moodle, Extensive Reading ER, EFL, Assessment, Graded Readers

1. Introduction

The reading skill is a vital component of the EFL learning process. It is essential for second and foreign language learners to be exposed to written texts and to comprehend them in order to improve their reading skills. According to Kirchhoff (2013), “Foreign language learners need opportunities to receive massive amount of comprehensible input, and reading material is a primary way to receive such input” (p. 192). That said, L2 students should be exposed to adequate and authentic reading materials outside the classroom in order to develop their reading capacities. Iwahori (2008) suggested that extensive reading (ER) is “one way that L2 learners are exposed to English, especially in an environment of English as a foreign language (EFL)” (p. 70). Suk (2016, p.73) added that extensive reading is “one of the most effective methods for developing reading ability”.

Bamford and Day (2004) define extensive reading as “an approach to language teaching in which learners read a lot of easy material in the new language” (p. 1). This reading approach involves the students with a great amount of reading materials that are “within their linguistic competence” (Grabe & Stoller, as cited in Suk, 2016, p.75). This helps them to obtain pleasure in reading as well as achieve a general understanding of the given materials (Grogan, Drummond, & Haddon, 2011). The positive effects of ER on students’ reading performance in particular and their overall academic achievement have been examined and confirmed by many researchers including Al-Nafisah (2015), Benettayeb (2010), Kano and Robb (2013), Kredátusová (2007), Maley (2009), and Mermelstein (2014). However, Dehghanpour and Hashemian (2015, p.30) argue that web-based L2 reading environments “promote active learning” and increase students’ interest and motivation. Furthermore, technology-based reading tools such as MOODLE Reader and ER MOODLE programs are effective techniques in “increasing dimensions of learners’ deep vocabulary knowledge” (Vaezi, 2013, p. 354) as well as boosting their language learning process.

The major aim of this case study is to investigate the effectiveness of a MOODLE ER program compared to a traditional paper-based ER program. Additionally, it will identify the main factors that contribute to the successful implementation of the MOODLE ER program in the Omani EFL context.

2. Theory and Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Background

ER benefits have been extensively evaluated and debated by many researchers in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) based on two main hypothesis, the input hypothesis and the reading hypothesis, introduced by Krashen (1982 & 1993) (Huang, 2015). The input hypothesis is defined as “Language acquisition takes place because there is comprehensible input. If input is understood, and if there is enough of it, the necessary grammar is automatically provided.” (Saville-Troike, 2012, p.48). In other words, learners should be exposed to huge number of reading contexts which matches their competence level and knowledge in order to develop their SLA. In fact, according to Savaş (2009) “Learners must be able to draw meaning from the information they are trying to access. If the text is comprehensible enough for the speaker, that is to say if there is only a 5% difference between the reader’s reading competence and the knowledge coded in the text, the learner can infer this meaning through context. With successive readings, the learner is repeatedly exposed to new words, expressions, structures, and aspects of discourse.” (p.68). Whereas, Simon (2017) and Huang (2015) acknowledged that the value of ER is derived from the reading hypothesis as well. Krashen (1994) defined the hypothesis as “Reading is responsible for much of our competence in reading comprehension, writing style, vocabulary, spelling and advanced grammatical competence. (p. 46). In other words, “comprehensible input in the form of reading helps to stimulate language acquisition” and “language learners can advance their language competence through ER on the condition that the reading materials are carefully selected to suit their level of comprehension.” (Huang, 2015, p.3). Based on the value and success of these hypothesis, numerous scholars implemented them in the ER programs in SLA contexts.

2.2 The Effectiveness of ER in different EFL contexts

Researches that examined and assessed the effectiveness of different ER programs are extensive. Bollen, Langdon, and Pain (2014) questioned the effectiveness of an ER program of a

Specialist Inclusive Learning Centre (SILC) project in 2011-2012 which was adopted in two curricula, EC3 and EC4. They acknowledged that in 2013, 88.6% of students actively participated in the program which “has fostered a habit of English reading in students and has provided them with a valuable source of English input” (2014, p. 209). The data collected clearly indicates that the pass percentage in this program was 74.5% which is considered a satisfactory progress. Moreover, this program not only enhanced student’s independence and confidence in their reading capacities, but also raised their awareness of the benefits of reading extensively (Bollen, Langdon, & Pain, 2014).

Similarly, Mermelstein (2014) investigated the effects of ER on Taiwanese university students’ overall academic results, their English language proficiency, and reading level and comprehension. Overall, this quantitative study demonstrated the positive contribution of ER to the development of second language acquisition and competence. The findings indicate that the ER program adopted impacts positively on students’ reading comprehension and performance. Mermelstein (2014, p. 238) indicated that ER is “an effective and enjoyable method for students to improve their reading abilities”. Furthermore, it helps them to have more exposure to the target language and to become more “autonomous learners” (Mermelstein, 2014, p. 238).

Likewise, Maley (2009) indicated similar benefits of ER. However, he shed light on the benefits of ER programs not only for students, but also for teachers. He listed 7 significant positive impacts of ER on students which include teaching students to be independent learners, getting enough exposure to the target language, developing all language skills, widening students’ vocabulary bank, improving writing skills and language acquisition, and creating self-achievement which helps maintain students’ motivation and encourage them to read more. Added to that, ER benefited teachers. ER helped to develop students’ English language skills and to enhance their language acquisition which was the case for the teachers as well. The teachers’ professional knowledge was also developed and their language was kept fresh and up-to-date. Moreover, ER broadened the teachers’ knowledge about the world and helped them set a good model for their students to follow. On the other hand, Maley (2009) pointed out that the use of an effective ER instrument helps to solve the issue of teachers not using ER so often in their classrooms.

In line with Maley (2009), Conley (n.d) emphasized that a well-established ER program can have a remarkable impact on EFL students. According to Conley (n.d), three components,

are required in order to establish an effective ER program; namely library, teaching, and testing preparation. The success of organizing these three components creates a successful ER program which offers students a wide range of reading practices, develops their autonomy, and fosters their motivation and self-achievement.

Robb (2013) investigated another core component which influenced the effectiveness of an ER program. He studied the impact of grade weighting on students' performance in ER. He compared three grading procedures of ER assessments that were followed by Kyoto Sangyo University from 2009 to 2012. The results indicate that students were more motivated, and their performance was enhanced when the grade percentage increased in 2012. This significant result was attributed to the fact that students were highly motivated to complete the ER assessments to avoid getting zero and to obtain 20% of their final grade. , it is apparent that a positive correlation exists between the ER grade weighting and students' motivation to complete their ER assignments.

2.3 The Success of Diverse ER Mechanisms

It is also important to mention that successful ER programs must be run through an effective ER mechanism to gain substantial benefits. Campbell (2012) inaugurated Moodle Reader module in order to enhance the unsuccessful ER program ran at the University of Kyoto. In the first semester, he obtained significant results with regards to students' participation (70%). However, only 40% of students completed the ER assessments. In the second semester, the participation and completion rates in two classes were 100% and 95.7% and 91% and 86% respectively. These results were attributed to the variation in teachers' instructions, as both teachers informed their students that participation was mandatory and failure to complete the ER tasks would result in the deduction of 20% of their final grade. Students' participation and ER assignments' completion rates in the other classes were not high because teachers did not give proper instructions to motivate their students to enroll and complete the assessments. Consequently, the results of an ER program can be promising if an effective ER instrument was used and clear instructions were delivered to students.

Along similar lines, Kano and Robb (2013) conducted a research study at Kyoto Sangyo University and showed that using proper ER mechanisms is mandatory to run a successful ER program. The authors examined the effectiveness of ER as an additive supplement. They required all first-year students of Oral Communication (OR) and Reading Skills (RS) in 2009 to

read five books outside class and to take ER assessments. These reading assignments were tested and graded through the Moodle Reader program. After the final examination, the students' average results in the year 2009 were compared to those in 2008 when the ER program was not implemented in the curriculum. The average score of students in 2009 showed high gain in the reading exam compared to the average score of 2008. Moreover, the results indicate that the performance of Level 1 students of 2009 was equal to the performance of Level 3 students of the previous year. Another significant finding is that the performance of Level 3 students of 2009 exceeded that of Level 5 students of the year 2008. These positive results were attributed to students' exposure to the English language through the readings they completed outside the classroom. The researchers highlighted several factors that contribute to the successful implementation of an ER program. The first factor relates to the use of an effective ER mechanism like the Moodle Reader which provides a huge number of reading materials and quizzes to students, monitors and tracks their progress, checks their accountability, and provides them with immediate feedback and grades. The second factor is the implementation of ER as a main supplement in all general English curriculums. The third factor relates to the grades set by the administration which reflect how objective and fair the program is. The library is the last factor the authors highlighted since it plays a supportive role in providing and obtaining the graded books needed.

Pennington (2011) also implemented an ER program using the Moodle Reader Module. He used popular graded readers which were classified into nine levels according to their language difficulty. Students were also streamed based on their TOEIC exam scores. Students selected the graded readers based on their interest and favor as well as their language ease. All the graded readers had 10-question quizzes which the students took after completing each book. Students received points for completing these tasks which varied according to the level of difficulty and the number of books read. This ER program was implemented in two consecutive years. The researcher examined the results of two classes ER1 (34 students) and ER3 (46 students). The completion rate of ER assignments was 79% for ER1 and 67% for ER3. The results showed that most students got "superior" and "A" grade in both classes. In ER2, 10 students got "superior" and nine students got "A" grades; while five students only failed to complete the ER assessments. Students of ER3 got more significant results with 14 students got "superior", 9 got "A" grade, and only 3 students failed to complete the ER tasks. Pennington

(2011, p. 48) pointed out that the ER program the paper discusses was effective and “a complete success”.

In another EFL study, Suk (2016) explored the effectiveness of ER on the reading comprehension, reading rate, and vocabulary acquisition of 171 Korean university students over a 15-week semester. The study has incorporated an ER component into a Korean university EFL reading curriculum. The author adopted a quasi-experimental research design which involved two control and two experimental groups. Weekly intensive reading instruction (100 minutes long) was received by the control group, while the two experimental groups received 70 minutes and 30 minutes intensive reading instructions respectively. In both groups, the ER assessments carried 25% of the students' course grades. In order to assess students' ER, five different activities were used in and outside the classroom; namely “scaffolded silent reading , writing a paper in three minutes, examining book blurbs, listening to story, and writing a response and Moodle Reader” (Suk, 2016, p. 79). Students were required to take a quiz on Moodle Reader on the book they finish reading in order to measure the accountability of the participants outside the classroom. To determine the effectiveness of ER, a repeated-measures MANOVA has been used. The study's findings show that even though the pre-test results indicate that the main scores of the extensive groups were lower than those of the intensive ones, the results indicate that the extensive groups significantly outperformed the intensive groups in the post-test in the three areas discussed above.

To sum up, the studies' results confirm the effectiveness of ER programs as an integrated element in the EFL context.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Current Study

The current study was implemented in Middle East College (MEC), a private higher education institution in the Sultanate of Oman, Muscat in 2016-2017. ER assessment is an essential component of assessment in the General English Foundation program (GFP). Level 2 students are required to read two graded stories per semester. The weightage of the ER assessment is 5% of the final grade. As part of the assessment, students fill up a reading log and present an oral summary of their graded stories. Students can choose their stories based on their level and interest from the library. The standard assessment faces some weaknesses; for example,

it is mainly assessed through oral interviews which evaluate their speaking competences not the reading comprehension. Another weakness is that students are less motivated to complete the assessment because of their low speaking capacities as well as it is paper-based not web-based assessment. Moreover, it is time consumer for both students and teachers as the teachers must conduct a 10 minutes interview for each student. Lastly, students don't receive immediate feedback on their performance. Considering the weaknesses of this paper-based method, a novel ER program was adopted. This novel method matches the ER requirements of word count and grade weightage. However, it is a technology-based program which is facilitated by the MOODLE software used at the institution. Level 2 stories were uploaded on MOODLE where students could read them online, or borrow the original copies from the library. After reading each story, students must take a Quiz on MOODLE to assess their comprehension. This is followed by an immediate feedback on students' performance as well as a grade.

3.2 Participants

About 100 Omani Level 2 students enrolled in the GFP participated in this research study. They belonged to three different sessions taught by three different instructors. According to the college Placement Test results, these students had a low-intermediate English language proficiency level. The average age of the participants is 19 years from the two genders.

3.3 The Design of the ER Moodle

The ER program was designed to assess the students' reading progress and to examine their understanding of their selected stories. The ER MOODLE quizzes were designed by the instructors. The questions which the quizzes included matched the students' level, covered the questions from the earlier reading log, and were aligned with the final reading exam questions. The Quizzes included different types of questions, specifically gap-filling, matching, multiple choice and true or false. The questions students answered were generated randomly to create a unique quiz for each student. Instructors could track their students' performance, records and grades through the progression track tool in the program. Students' feedback and grades were provided immediately through the program to both instructors and students.

The academic semester in the current institution lasts 14 weeks. In this experiment, the paper-based ER assessment was implemented in the first 7 weeks of the semester, while the innovative ER method was conducted in the other 7 weeks. Students had to read 700 words to earn 2.5% of their final grade in each part of the semester. A survey was conducted to collect

students' perceptions of using MOODLE and the paper-based ER assessments. This survey aimed to highlight the students' preferences towards the two assessments.

4. Analysis and Discussions

4.1 The Findings

The research aimed to investigate the effectiveness of ER assessment using the MOODLE software, where a database containing different kinds of questions related to the uploaded graded readers was formed. The results of the three Level 2 experimental groups were measured and analyzed through comparing the marks and the number of attempts between the novel and the standard assessment. The comparison of means (M) of the three groups' marks obtained in the two parts of the semester and the participation percentage is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: *The Means and Number of Attempts between the two methods*

Groups	N		Means (M)	Part 1 Attempts	Part 2 Attempts
Group A	33	Standard	1.58	78.8%	87.8%
		MOODLE	2.17		
Group B	32	Standard	1.76	78.7%	93.75%
		MOODLE	2.9		
Group C	33	Standard	1.9	93.9%	100%
		MOODLE	3.11		

Based on the comparison of the marks between the standard and the novel assessments, the differences in the mean reflect the outstanding outcomes of implementing MOODLE in the ER mechanism. As shown in Table 1, the means of the MOODLE assessment in groups A, B, and C dramatically increased compared to the means of the traditional assessment in the three groups. The highest mean score was obtained by group three with a mean of 3.11 in the MOODLE assessment. This score is considered as enormous progress compared with their achievement in the traditional assessment with a mean of only 1.90. The encouraging means' results in the MOODLE assessment were shown as well in the other two groups which significantly demonstrate the promising and positive effectiveness of the MOODLE assessments

compared with the traditional one. The analysis of means as shown in the Table determined that the experimental group outperformed the control group. These findings are equivalent to the proved hypothesis by Mermelstein (2014) in his research that ER program “significantly improved results on the participations’ reading levels” (p. 263).

4.2 Discussion of the Findings

Another major criterion which showed the effectiveness of the MOODLE assessment method compared to the traditional assessment is the number of attempts. The completion rates of MOODLE assessments for the three groups were 87.8%, 93.75%, and 100% respectively, compared with 78.8%, 78.7%, and 93.9% for the traditional assessments as shown in Table 1. These results indicate that the number of attempts increased by 10%, 15% and 6% in the three group respectively. In another words, these percentages indicate that using MOODLE assessments increased students’ enjoyment and motivation to read and complete the quizzes electronically more than paper-based assessments. These results concur with Robb (2013) who specifies that electronic assessment is “more effective” than any “direct discussion” or “oral or written reports” (p26-27). Overall, this positive impact will promote a habit of English reading among students and provide them with a valuable platform of English input since ER is considered as “one of the easiest ways to implement an input-rich learning environment in a pedagogical setting” (Yamashita, 2013, p. 249). Moreover, “developing good reading habits benefits leaders because it fosters personal intellectual growth.” (Alajbeli & Alqahtani, 2017, p. 1270)

An additional crucial aspect which increased the efficiency of the ER program adopted in the study is grading. In this study, grading was one of the dynamic aspects which augmented students’ enthusiasm and encouraged them to complete the assigned tasks. Since the ER assessments carried 5% of the total grade, students were stimulated to complete the tasks. As shown in Table 1, students’ attempts in both the control and experimental groups were considerably high due to the impact of the grade weighting. Robb (2013, p. 21) argues that “when the course grading criteria includes a requirement to complete extensive reading, students are more likely to complete the reading”. This study’s results are in line with those of Campbell (2012), Kirchhoff (2013), Robb (2015), and Kano and Robb (2013). Students’ participation was greatly affected by the grade weighting which was maintained in this ER program, although

rewards and grades are sometimes not recommended since reading itself is “its own reward” as Day and Bamford (1998, p. 8) explained.

4.3 The Results of the Student’ Survey

Based on the conducted survey on students’ feedback of the two assessments, MOODLE and the standard ER assessments, the majority of students (94%) preferred MOODLE assessments as it is more convenient for them in terms of time and place. The respondents pointed out that they were able to complete the required quizzes any-time and any-where using any device including their mobile phones and iPads, which made it more convenient for them to meet the requirements. It was proved by Chavangklang and Suppasetserree, 2018 that “online exercises and online learning materials” (p. 247) was highly promoted by the students. As “learning with Moodle was convenient for assignment submission, instant marking, easy carrying mobile phone” (p.247). This is why the number of students who attempted the quizzes online was much higher than the number of students who took the paper-based quizzes. Benettayeb (2015) emphasizes that “the digital generation of students” is highly devoted to technological education by using the internet which “stimulates students’ involvement and interest in extensive reading” (p. 174-175). This technological education create the best learning setting for students as Chavangklang and Suppasetserree, 2018 indicate that “ learning anywhere, anytime is an example of convenient learning environment” (p. 250). In fact, the MOODLE assessments meet the students’ interests and preferences since the new generation is more technology-oriented. This encouraged both the motivated and less motivated students to complete the ER assessments using the online MOODLE mechanism. As discussed above, students were motivated by a variety of factors such as “instrumental factors (scoring points toward their final grade, reading to pass quizzes, reading to meet deadlines, etc.)” (Bollen, Langdon, & Pain, 2014, p. 210). Consequently, motivation is considered a fundamental factor for students to accomplish the ER assessment.

Another important point to mention is that students had plenty of time to access the graded readers which were uploaded on MOODLE, and therefore, were exposed to the English language, which increased the reading autonomy. As a matter of fact, ER “helps second language learners become more autonomous learners, especially in EFL environments where exposure to the target language may be limited” (Mermelstein, 2014, p. 238). Nation and Waring (2013, P. 14) agreed that ER will promote students’ knowledge of the language and that students “will

develop good reading skills, will come to enjoy reading, and will also show an improvement in other skills besides reading” for a long-life term. Aljabeli & Alqahtani, 2017 stated that “reading is beneficial to gaining knowledge, which aids students throughout their academic life and future careers.” (p. 1270).

Graded readers are simplified and modified resources of controlled academic English language. Waring (1997) identified graded readers as “Books written specifically for language learners to develop their reading ability. They are made easy to read by simplifying the vocabulary and grammar so that the learner can easily understand the story. Graded Readers are not children’s books but in general they are books for adult language learners.” (p. 8). In other words, graded readers should meet certain criteria, namely matching the students’ level, and preferences and developing the readers’ comprehension to move them from lexis decoding to general knowledge of the context. Therefore, the chosen stories in the experimental program were selected from different academic and international publishers, namely Cambridge, Compass, Oxford, and Penguin. These publishers classified the stories based on different students’ level according to the number of words “that are most frequently used by native speakers” and “simplified sentence structure” (Kredátusová, 2007, p. 18) in order to progress students’ reading skills smoothly.

Understanding the MOODLE quizzes required intensive and careful reading on the part of the students. Bollen, Langdon, and Pain (2014) found that “all passed quizzes were accurate reflections of actual reading, and that students did not simply cheat or guess quiz questions for the sake of meeting individual reading targets” (p. 210). On the other hand, the traditional assessment method is more oral-based since the students need to summarize the story to the instructor.

About 87.8% of the students also indicated that the immediate feedback and marks provided directly after doing the quizzes was more objective and fairer, and encouraged them to complete the assigned tasks.

5. Conclusion

The present study’s findings indicated that integrating an ER program using MOODLE into the EFL Omani context has been a great success and resulted in remarkably significant achievements among students. The analysis of the quantitative data revealed the value of

MOODLE program in promoting students' reading skills in terms of comprehension, motivation, convenience, participation and satisfaction. The results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the ER assessment grades. Throughout the study, the ER assessments using MOODLE were both beneficial and enjoyable in promoting a habit of English reading outside the classroom and providing a valuable platform of English language input. In this experiment, students' general involvement was significantly affected by the grade weighting which boosted the students' enthusiasm and motivation to complete the assignments.

Overall, the participants indicated a high satisfaction of using the MOODLE program since the assessment it contained were more convenient for them in terms of time and place. Moreover, the students were encouraged to complete the ER tasks because MOODLE met their interests and preferences as a technologically-oriented generation, provided more exposure to the English language, increased their reading autonomy and provided them with an immediate feedback and marks.

To conclude, this study contributes to the evaluation of the effectiveness of ER using MOODLE in one of the higher education institutions in Oman. It is obvious that the number of participants in this study represent a sample of the Omani EFL context. Hence, further research is needed about the implementation of this practice and replicating the results in multiple settings. In addition, the present study encourages further research to challenge or validate its conclusions by providing additional perceptions of using technology-based ER programs like M-reader in EFL contexts, evaluating students' motivation throughout the ER procedure and highlighting learners' and instructors' feedback. Finally, Al-Nafisah (2015) stated that "numerous studies were conducted and several programs were introduced in the Western countries, while very few ones were carried out in the Arab world to investigate the effectiveness of ER in developing students' reading comprehension." (p. 103). Thus, a step further needs to be taken to contribute to the existing literature investigating the effectiveness of ER assessment using MOODLE or M-reader in the Sultanate of Oman in particular and the GCC region in general.

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