

MReader Quizzes: Help or Hindrance?

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(Received on May 29, 2015)

Abstract

MReader is a web site that contains quizzes that test whether or not students have read and understood the contents of a graded reader. If a student passes a quiz, the number of words in the book is added to the student's running total. The use of such a web site allows teachers to easily monitor student progress in extensive reading. However, MReader goes against one of the original principles of extensive reading, which says that reading should be for fun, and a goal in and of itself. This paper will consider this debate, and analyze student feedback from a survey regarding attitudes towards MReader quizzes.

Background

It is not easy for teachers to get university-aged students to see the value in extensive reading. Some students complain that semester word count reading goals are too high; others, who have been doing only intensive reading up until they reach university, find it difficult to make the switch and keep a dictionary by their side while reading, making the entire process slow and often painful. Therefore, adding yet another task on top of extensive reading to students' already full workloads is quite reasonably frowned upon by many students and teachers.

The current view towards post-reading comprehension exercises, particularly those that are not open-ended and do not involve critical thinking or reflection, appears to be rather negative: "Closed-questions rob students of the enjoyment of the story and are not authentic tasks" (Stephens 2014). Davis (1995) discusses extensive reading as something that should occur "without the pressures of testing or marks" (p. 329). Likewise, in Day and Bamford's (2002) famous list of top ten extensive reading principles, they state that reading should be "its own reward", and "not usually followed by comprehension questions" (p. 138). Renandya and Jacobs (2002) summarize by saying that "not all writers on ER agree that postreading tasks should be included in the ER programs. The main objection is that postreading tasks take time away from reading and may spoil students' reading

enjoyment” (p. 298). The idea is to get students seeing the value of reading, as something that happens apart from a classroom, for pleasure or information-seeking purposes. In traditional EFL classrooms, reading may be thought of as more a means to improve one’s overall language ability, rather than something that happens every day, whether in a foreign language context or not.

Day and Bamford do allow room for follow-up activities “to find out what the student understood and experienced from the reading; to monitor students’ attitudes toward reading; to keep track of what and how much students read” (p. 138). The purpose of MReader (<http://mreader.org>) is just this: to check a student has understood a book’s contents and to measure how much a student has read (see McBride and Milliner, 2014, for a complete description of MReader). So in a sense Day and Bamford’s principle is contradictory, in that it allows for post-reading comprehension checks while recommending that reading occur as its own end. Therefore, to what extent are comprehension quizzes, such as those on MReader, acceptable extensions to regular extensive reading?

If students generally find MReader to be a nuisance, something that gets in the way of reading for pleasure, then that would be a good indication that MReader is not a good way to monitor students’ reading progress. On the other hand, if students enjoy the experience of taking a quiz to verify their reading comprehension, then MReader may be acceptable to retain as a measurement tool.

Method

To answer this question, a 4-item survey was conducted in a 29-student extensive reading class at a private university. Students were given approximately 5 minutes at the end of class to answer the four items, administered via a Moodle questionnaire module. The first two items were open-ended, and the second two items were rankings on a 5-point scale. The questions were as follows:

1. What do you like about MReader quizzes? (*open-ended*)
2. What don’t you like about MReader quizzes? (*open-ended*)
3. How much do you enjoy doing MReader quizzes? (*5-point scale*)
5 = Enjoy a lot, 1 = Don’t enjoy at all
4. How easy is it to pass an MReader quiz? (*5-point scale*)
5 = Very easy, 1 = Very difficult

The two open-ended questions were provided first, so that students would have considered the pros and cons of MReader before answering the third question, which is the crux of the entire survey. The fourth question was included because if quizzes are exceedingly difficult, (1) student enjoyment would be adversely affected, and (2) it would demonstrate that MReader is not accomplishing its goal, which is to give credit to students who have understood the gist of their book.

Subjects were first-year students mostly, in a year-long extensive reading class. The survey was given in the fifth week of the first semester, a point at which students should have had sufficient training in extensive reading and MReader to be able to knowledgeably answer the survey questions. Students' overall English proficiency was quite low, and therefore students' word count reading goal was set at 30,000, which, even with ample teacher prodding and class silent sustained reading time, has proven to be quite a challenge for previous classes of this level.

Results

I will first share the results from the last two data-based questions, and then pick out substantive responses to the first two open-ended questions. The responses to Question 3, regarding MReader enjoyment, were as follows:

Responses	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Number of Respondents	1	2	7	9	10	29
Percent of Total	3 %	7 %	24%	31%	34%	100%

The mean was 3.9, and the mode was Response 5, the answer choice that signaled highest enjoyment of quiz-taking.

The results of Question 4, regarding the difficulty level of MReader quizzes, were as follows:

Responses	1	2	3	4	5	Total
Number of Respondents	2	4	12	10	1	29
Percent of Total	7 %	14%	41%	34%	3 %	100%

The mean was 3.1, and the mode was Response 3, the answer choice that signaled an average or "normal" level of difficulty.

For Question 1, about the aspects of MReader that students like, the most popular

response was that students highly valued being able to check how well they understood the contents of the book they had read. In a similar vein, students liked being able to review and reconfirm what they had gathered from their initial reading of the text. A total of eight students mentioned this in one way or another (see Appendix for original responses in Japanese). The second most popular response to this question was in regard to the sense of accomplishment and happiness students feel upon successfully passing a quiz, which is mentioned by five students. Last, four students say that they feel their English vocabulary and reading ability is improving, but it is unclear whether they are talking about MReader quizzes specifically, or extensive reading in general.

For Question 2, which asked students what they did not like about MReader, the answers were more varied, and often off-topic. Some students discussed what they disliked about extensive reading in general, rather than things specific to MReader. The most common response, given by five students, was that MReader did not have quizzes available for the books they had read. A response from three students was that they lose motivation when unknown words or phrases appeared, but again, it is ambiguous as to whether this is referring to the MReader quiz itself or to the graded reader text. Other responses concerned the layout of the quizzes and testing process, for example, students wanting the number of questions in a quiz to be reduced, or wanting to know exactly how many answers they got wrong.

Discussion

Almost two-thirds of all questionnaire respondents gave a score of 4 or 5 to the pleasure found in doing MReader quizzes. Overall, students appear to enjoy doing MReader quizzes. This may be slightly surprising, considering the fact that they are indeed quizzes, which add to the amount of “work” that must be done to complete a class assignment. But looking at the reasons why students like MReader, we can see that students see the benefit in being able, via the quiz, to review the material they have read. We can also see the motivation that passing a quiz gives to students. Note that not a single student mentions the opposite: the disappointment or discouragement that might be felt after failing a quiz. This leads me to believe that students who fail an MReader quiz may not be entirely surprised by the result, as some students looking for a quick way to increase their total word count try to skim their book a little too quickly (or sometimes not reading any-

thing at all) before attempting a quiz. A possible topic for follow-up research would be to investigate why students do fail certain MReader quizzes.

The points that students dislike about MReader are not too big of a concern, especially because the creators of MReader are already aware of most of the issues mentioned, and are constantly working to overcome them. The biggest gripe, that MReader did not have a quiz for a certain book, can probably be explained by the fact that students in the study group were in a low-level class, and therefore reading books that were too short and simple to be convertible into a quiz. MReader does have a feature called “Give credit for books that have no quizzes” that adds the book’s word count to the student’s running total, but even here, not all books and publishers are represented. Although it would be impossible to get word count and other data for all available graded readers, certainly this list could be expanded to allow teachers an easy way to give students credit for reading a book with no quiz. Another possibility would be to allow for only one- or two-question quizzes for such extremely low-level books. This would also overcome another student complaint, that quizzes had too many questions. Having shorter quizzes would also mean that there would be more time for actual reading, and writers who criticize such post-reading comprehension activities would have less reason to find fault with them.

Another method often employed by teachers to check that students have actually read the books they claim to have read is to ask students to complete a book report. The students in the target group were likewise asked to fill out a book report if the book they had read did not have a corresponding quiz available on MReader. It is interesting how many students were troubled by the fact that some of the books they had read did not have such a quiz. This may demonstrate that while doing MReader quizzes is thought of as a fun and easy way to get credit for reading a book, book reports are regarded as more tedious and time-consuming.

Regarding the ease or difficulty of passing MReader quizzes, the average response is somewhere right in the middle – they are neither too easy nor too difficult. (In retrospect, it may have been more appropriate to administer the data-based questions on an even-numbered scale so that students would be forced to choose a slightly above or below average ranking.) While a mean of 3.1 out of 5 may seem like an acceptable result, I actually find it to be a bit of a concern. MReader’s quizzes are designed so that anybody who has read and understood a book should *easily* be able to pass the book’s quiz and get credit for reading it. Therefore, I expected the responses to this question to lie more in the range

of Very Easy – Easy. Quizzes are also supposed to be created with language that is at the same level as the vocabulary in the book itself, but this is not always so easy to do. It could be that students are finding it difficult to pass quizzes because they have not fully understood the contents of the book, rather than because the quiz itself is difficult. This lies outside the scope of this paper, but, as mentioned earlier, would be a good question for a follow-up study.

Conclusion

For those proponents of the idea that reading should be its own reward (which I assume most extensive reading practitioners are), I hope that this study has shown that reading coupled with a post-reading comprehension quiz can be just as rewarding and enjoyable for students. While MReader is not a perfect system, nor should one ever expect it to be, it is constantly improving, and allows both teachers and students an easy way to monitor progress in reading and language learning. Teachers should not hesitate to use this valuable resource as a supplement to their regular extensive reading activities.

References

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Appendix

Student Responses to Open-Ended Survey Questions Question 1: What do you like about MReader quizzes?

楽しいこと。
答えやすい点。
本の内容をきちんと理解しているか確かめるところがいいと思った
クイズがあるのがいい。
文字数が少ない本は読みやすいのでいい
色々な話が読めるので楽しい
物語なので、おもしろい。
本の内容が理解しているかがわかるところ
語彙力がつく
達成感を得られる。さまざまな話を読むことができる。
理解度が深まるし、とても楽しいところ。
短い文なので理解しやすい。
クイズが成功したときの喜び。
楽しいところ
クイズにクリアするのが楽しい。読んだ後にクイズを解いたらさらに本のあらすじがわかる。
自分がどれだけ正しく読むことができているかわかるところです。
本を読みながらクイズができるので内容もよく理解できて面白い。
解けたときは達成感がある。
物語の内容を理解できているかをクイズ形成してくれるところが良いです。
語彙力がつくところ
読んだ本の内容を再確認できるので良いと思います。
簡単だから好き
多くの本を取り扱っている。
クイズが合格になったとき。
物語を読むことが好き
いろんな種類の問題があっておもしろいと思う。それと、並べ替えの問題が意外と面白い。
本の種類が多いところ
英単語がたくさん覚えれるところ。英文を読む練習になるところ。
話の内容がおもしろいところどんな状況でその単語が使われているか分かるところ

Question 2: What don't you like about MReader quizzes?

難しい単語や熟語が出てくると、読みたくなくなることもある
特にないです。
特になし
クイズがない本がある。
文字数が多い本は読む気が失せるので嫌だ
難しいからちょっと苦手
特になし。
嫌いなポイントは特にありません
めんどくさい
クリックミスによる解答を消せない。
何問正解したのかがわからないところ。
時間制限があるところ。
図書館にあってある本のクイズがなかなか見つからない。
ないです
クイズに相当する本がなかなかない。
問題の数が多いところです。
借りてきた本が載ってないことが多いとこ。
難しいから嫌い
パソコンでクイズができるのとできないところです。
単語がわからないと読めないところ
特にないです。
難しいから嫌い
すべてのレベルの問題を解けるようにしてほしい。合格ラインを教えてほしい。誤った選択をした場合にページを戻るのが面倒。
難しいところ。
わからない単語や表現が出てくること
いろんな問題があって面白いけど、それが逆に難しい。もっと、簡単な問題で問題数を減らしてほしい。
特になし
並び替えが少し難しいところ。
テストがあること問題がごちゃごちゃになっているところ