

A Closer Look at the MReader Settings

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Background Information for the Study

The extensive reading (ER) program for all first year students in the Faculties of Science & Engineering and Architecture at Kindai University, a large university in Osaka Prefecture, Japan, has been in existence for nearly 10 years. The rationale to start the ER program was quite simple. In short, with the constant and growing pressure to improve the English language proficiency of students within these faculties without providing the corresponding increase in English classes and/or English language credits, it was obvious that there was a need to push students to do more outside of the classroom. ER was clearly an answer to this dilemma since more teacher-student contact time was simply out of the question. Moreover, the English language instructors, many of whom work as adjunct (i.e., part-time) lecturers, already felt overworked and could not take on the burden of doing more for their students. At the time, ER appeared to be one task that could be implemented for all first year students that could increase English language proficiency without more teacher-student contact time. Certainly, the research concerning extensive reading supported this conclusion then as it does today.

Many researchers have demonstrated that there are gains in language proficiency when students read a lot (Cho and Krashen, 1994 & 1995). Robb & Susser (1989), Lai (1993) and Bell (2001) showed that students who read extensively outperform those who don't with regards to faster reading speeds and higher reading comprehension scores. Waring (2009) argues that a massive amount of reading is necessary for vocabulary acquisition. In short, he concludes that study from a textbook alone is not enough; students also need to read extensively in their second language (L2) in addition to language textbook study. Mason (2005) states categorically that a student's writing skills, vocabulary, grammaticality, and of course reading comprehension improve with ER. And interestingly, early studies demonstrated that spelling and writing improved with ER (Elley and Mangubhai, 1981; Hafiz and Tudor, 1990; Polak

and Krashen, 1988). Finally, Nation (1997) advocates the use of ER in language learning since it's a student-centered activity where students choose what it is they read, thus improving motivation to read in their L2. He also states that ER can be done outside of class without teacher intervention, one of the main reasons for initiating the Kindai ER program from the outset.

Clearly, ER is a viable task for students to do more outside the language-learning classroom. Let's turn our attention now to the study involving the MReader, the online program that manages student reading in the Kindai ER program.

The MReader

The MReader is a browser-based system that is practical, efficient and student-centered in regards to managing an ER program. The premise behind the MReader is quite simple. After completing a graded reader, a student accesses the program's website (<http://mreader.org>) and logs in with a *Username* and *Password*. The student then enters the title of the graded reader that was recently completed and selects the small icon that matches the graded reader's book cover to access that reader's quiz. Each quiz consists of ten items, testing the student's basic comprehension and knowledge of that book. If a student shows a reasonable understanding of the book (suggested at 60% for passing from the *MReader Manual for School Administrators*), the student is given credit for reading the book. The MReader, therefore, provides an accountability feature to ER, ensuring that the students are reading the books, and demonstrating a reasonable, albeit, limited comprehension of the book. The MReader then provides a record of when the quiz was taken, the title of the graded reader, the level of graded reader, and the words for the specific book.

The program has several important and useful functions:

- It keeps track of the graded readers each student has read, providing data that is essential for assessing each student's ER performance.
- It provides an accountability mechanism to ensure that students are doing the required reading. In short, the passing of a quiz is considered sufficient evidence that the student has successfully completed and understood that reader.
- It provides a ready-made quiz of ten randomly selected items from a pool of 20 or so quiz questions.

- It contains quizzes for over 4,600 graded reader titles (as of May 2015).
- It keeps each student on the task of reading; students need only a few minutes to take a quiz as opposed to writing a more time consuming report or another kind of “feedback mechanism” that teachers typically require as evidence of student reading.
- It is a student-centered program, requiring only a cursory look by classroom teachers to ensure their students are reading.
- It allows students to take quizzes at any time of their choosing and convenience. Mobile applications and smartphones can access the MReader program at any time.
- It motivates students in that they can quickly and easily confirm their understanding of a book.
- It provides a clear record showing both teacher and student the books as well as the number of words that have been read.
- It can provide data from an entire ER program concerning what was read by each student and other specific information concerning each quiz taken (date, time of quiz, the score of each quiz as a percent, level of readers, word-counts, “Passed” or “Not Passed, etc.)

The Study

With close to ten years managing the Kindai University ER program for the Faculty of Science and Engineering and Faculty of Architecture, several nagging questions persisted in regards to the MReader. The first question concerned the suggested threshold to pass a quiz at 60%. In short, is a 60% passing threshold on the MReader too easy for a student to pass without demonstrating a sufficient level of comprehension? Certainly, if a student has read an entire graded reader and reasonably understood it, then passing the quiz should be a simple matter of answering a few quiz questions correctly. Moreover, passing an MReader quiz should be easy since the emphasis of ER is to read vast amounts in the student's second language (L2), not total and/or complete comprehension of what is read. The Extensive Reading Foundation explicitly promotes “an adequate comprehension so they (i.e. the students) don't need a dictionary”. Students need to read quickly and hopefully enjoy the reader. This is why it is advised that the MReader passing threshold be set to 60%. At 60%, it is easy for students to pass a quiz with a reasonable level of comprehension. ER should be success

oriented so *fast, fluent, enjoyable* are key words to any ER program. In terms of comprehension, *adequate* comprehension is sufficient, not *total* or *complete*. This is why it is ill-advised to set the passing threshold at 80% or 90%.

That being said, if the threshold to pass is set too low (i.e., the suggested 60%), isn't it possible that some students might pass the quiz even though they didn't finish reading the entire book? Perhaps they could even pass a non-fiction reader quiz without reading the book at all, relying on background knowledge of the topic. Could the students pass a quiz by reading most, say 66% or 75% of a graded reader, but not all? This certainly seems plausible, if not likely. Perhaps students could even pass a quiz if they have read half a reader or even less than half. Again, this seems possible if students can guess from context the correct answers of quiz questions by inferring how a story might end.

The questions posed above led to these specific research questions:

1. *What is the appropriate passing threshold for quizzes on the MReader? Is the suggested 60% passing threshold appropriate or is this too easy?*
2. *Can students pass an MReader quiz if the passing threshold is 60% by reading only part of book? Moreover, what would happen if the threshold was raised to 70%?*

In order to answer these two questions, the following study was conducted in the second semester of the 2015-2016 academic year.

Method

Participants

This study took place during a semester-long first-year English course at Kindai University, a large Japanese university in Osaka Prefecture, in the second semester of the 2015-2016 academic year. Participants were 82 first-year university students. The students for this study came from three intact required first-year English classes, two from the Faculty of Science and Engineering, and one from the Faculty of Architecture. The course, a four-skills Oral English class, was identical across the three intact classes in terms of textbook, instruction and assessment. Each of the three classes included an ER component, which accounted for 30% of each student's final grade, the other 70% coming from quizzes and tests (40%) as well as classroom performance (30%).

During the first semester prior to the study, students manually enrolled themselves into the MReader, the web-based ER program. During this first semester, students became familiar with ER and the MReader program. Students could borrow readers from either their instructor or from other facilities on the Kindai University campus. For every 2000 words read, students received one point towards their final grade. Reading 60,000 words would give a student full points concerning the ER component. Of course, students could read more and accrue bonus points towards their final grade as well. This first-year course was designed with ER in mind, providing a strong incentive for students to read a lot in order to receive a high final grade/score.

Procedure

During the first-class meeting of the second semester, the instructor went over the course syllabus, which included detailed instructions concerning the ER component for the course. ER, like that in the first semester, was used for assessment concerning their performance in the course. Again, 30% of each student's final grade came from the ER component. Following the explanation of the course syllabus, the instructor explained the purpose of the study and the five in-class reading tasks that the students would undertake. The research questions were also explained so that all students were fully aware of the study.

For the study, students would read five partial graded readers of varying length in a controlled classroom environment. Immediately following the reading of the partial graded reader, students would take the MReader quiz for that specific reader. Students would read a fourth (25%) of the first reader, a third (33%) of the second, a half (50%) of the third, two-thirds (66%) of the fourth, and three-fourths (75%) of the fifth and final reader (see Table 1).

Table 1.

Reader Title	Percent of book read (words read)	Total word count	Reading time
1. <i>Midnight on the Moon</i>	25% (1415)	5660	14 minutes
2. <i>The Whistle and Dead Men's Eyes</i>	33% (2889)	8666	28 minutes
3. <i>Holly the Eco Warrior</i>	50% (2373)	4745	23 minutes
4. <i>Nelson Mandela</i>	66% (3575)	5416	35 minutes
5. <i>Basketball's Greatest Players</i>	75% (3536)	4715	35 minutes

The allotted time for reading would be based on a reading speed of 100 words per minute, a reading speed that was deemed appropriate for Kindai University students through casual observation when conducting speed-reading activities. Thus, for the first book (*Midnight on the Moon*), students would be allotted a maximum reading time of 14 minutes for the 1415 words. (*Note that from casual observation during the study, time was not a factor and students had more than enough time to finish the partial readers.*) Immediately after completing the partial reader, students would take the quiz for that specific reader using the MReader. Students could refer to the partial book when taking the MReader quiz.

The five graded readers that were selected for the study were removed from the quiz bank of the MReader prior to the start of the 2015-2016 academic school year to ensure that students in the study would not read these books in the first semester. In the second semester, when the study was conducted, the books were only entered into the MReader quiz bank prior to the in-class reading task. The five specific readers were selected since they matched the reading level of first-year Kindai students and the total word count of the books seemed appropriate in that the amount of class time spent reading for the study would not be excessive. The first three readers were fiction titles and the latter two were non-fiction.

Total word counts of each book were known prior to the study. Thus the exact amount to be read of each partial graded reader was calculated by counting words in the reader. If the exact number of words for a partial reader ended in mid-sentence, the remainder of the sentence was also included in the reading to aid in comprehension.

Once the amount of reading was known, the partial reader was then copied and scanned as a PDF into the instructor's private learner management system (Moodle) so that all students could access the partial reader using their smartphone. After completing the in-class reading using their smartphone, each student would access the MReader and take that reader's quiz. A maximum of 10 minutes was allotted for the MReader quiz.

To entice students to attentively read in class, students were told that if they passed the quiz, they would receive full-words for that particular reader. However, in what was deemed a more likely scenario, if students did not pass, they would still receive the words that were read in class. Again, using the first book, *Midnight on the Moon* as an example, if the MReader quiz was "Not Passed", the student would receive 1415 words. Yet if the student somehow passed the quiz having read only a quarter of the reader, the student would get the full 5660 words. Prior to reading each of the five readers in the study, the students were reminded to do their best to finish the partial reader in the allotted time then take the quiz.

It was expected that as students completed more of a reader, passing rates would increase. Therefore, passing rates would likely be the lowest for the first reader in the study where students were reading only a quarter of the reader and the highest in the last where student were reading three-quarters of the reader. It was thought that few students would pass the MReader quizzes where the threshold for passing the quiz was 60% for the first three titles. In the first three readers of the study, students were reading only a quarter, a third and a half of the reader, respectively. It was thought that most students could not pass the MReader quizzes because they were completing so little of each reader. Yet certainly, a few students might pass the quiz if they got lucky and the random MReader questions were taken from the first half of the reader. Moreover, some students with strong English skills might be able to predict the ending of the simple stories and this would be a definite aid when taking the MReader quiz. Yet as we move through the titles and get to readers four and five where more than 60% of the reader was completed, it was anticipated that more students, perhaps most, would pass these MReader quizzes even though they did not complete the entire graded reader.

Results

When reading only a quarter or 25% of a graded reader, students in all three classes showed a remarkable rate of passing (see Table 2). Surprisingly, 40% of all students in the study were able to pass the MReader quiz when the threshold for passing was set at the suggested 60%. Again, having read only a quarter of the reader, 40% of the students in the study were able to pass the MReader quiz with 60% failing.

Looking at the specific score of each student's MReader quiz and seeing who would have passed the MReader quiz if the passing threshold was set at 70%, the passing numbers drop substantially to only 13% of the total (see Table 3).

Table 2. Reader 1, (¼ read of *Midnight on the Moon*), 60% Passing Threshold

Class	Passed	Not Passed
<i>Tues 3</i> (<i>n</i> = 28)	11 (39%)	17 (61%)
<i>Tues 4</i> (<i>n</i> = 28)	11 (39%)	17 (61%)
<i>Wed 2</i> (<i>n</i> = 22)	9 (41%)	13 (59%)
<i>Total</i> (<i>n</i> = 78)	31 (40%)	47 (60%)

When the passing threshold was set at 70%, 87% of all students could not pass the MReader quiz when reading only a quarter (25%) of the graded reader.

Table 3. Reader 1, (¼ read of *Midnight on the Moon*), 70% Passing Threshold

Class	Passed	Not Passed
<i>Tues 3</i> (<i>n</i> = 28)	4 (14%)	24 (86%)
<i>Tues 4</i> (<i>n</i> = 28)	5 (18%)	23 (82%)
<i>Wed 2</i> (<i>n</i> = 22)	1 (5%)	21 (95%)
<i>Total</i> (<i>n</i> = 78)	10 (13%)	68 (87%)

The same trend seems to occur for the second book of the study, *The Whistle and Dead Men's Eyes*, where students read a third, or 33% of the reader. In Table 4, we can observe a passing rate of 56%. Having read a bit more, 33% as opposed to 25% for the

first book of the study, we would expect passing rates to increase and this is what was observed. Quite surprisingly, the results showed that slightly more than half of the students in the study could pass the book by reading only a third of this reader.

Table 4. Reader 2, ($\frac{1}{3}$ read of *The Whistle and Dead Men's Eyes*), 60% Passing Threshold

Class	Passed	Not Passed
<i>Tues 3</i> ($n = 28$)	11 (39%)	17 (61%)
<i>Tues 4</i> ($n = 28$)	17 (61%)	11 (39%)
<i>Wed 2</i> ($n = 26$)	18 (69%)	8 (31%)
<i>Total</i> ($n = 82$)	46 (56%)	36 (44%)

However, when the passing threshold was raised to 70% (see Table 5), only 22% of the students could pass the MReader quiz. Again, having read more of the book, we should expect to see more students passing the first book in the study and this is exactly what was observed. Comparing reader 1 with reader 2, we see a passing rate of 40% and 56% respectively when the passing threshold is 60%, and 13% and 22% respectively when the passing threshold is 70%.

Table 5. Reader 2, ($\frac{1}{3}$ read of *The Whistle and Dead Men's Eyes*), 70% Passing Threshold

Class	Passed	Not Passed
<i>Tues 3</i> ($n = 28$)	4 (14%)	24 (86%)
<i>Tues 4</i> ($n = 28$)	7 (25%)	21 (75%)
<i>Wed 2</i> ($n = 26$)	7 (27%)	19 (73%)
<i>Total</i> ($n = 82$)	18 (22%)	64 (78%)

Tables 6 and 7 show the data for third book in the study, *Holly the Eco Warrior*, where students completed exactly half of the reader. When reading exactly half, students passed at a rate of 53% when the passing threshold was at the suggested 60%.

Yet only 15 of 78 students or 19% could pass when the passing threshold was set at the higher 70%.

Table 6. Book 3 (½ read of *Holly the Eco Warrior*), 60% Passing Threshold

Class	Passed	Not Passed
<i>Tues 3 (n = 28)</i>	13 (46%)	15 (54%)
<i>Tues 4 (n = 28)</i>	18 (64%)	10 (36%)
<i>Wed 2 (n = 22)</i>	10 (45%)	12 (55%)
<i>Total (n = 78)</i>	41 (53%)	37 (47%) 56%)

Table 7. Book 3 (½ read of *Holly the Eco Warrior*), 70% Passing Threshold

Class	Passed	Not Passed
<i>Tues 3 (n = 28)</i>	7 (25%)	21 (75%)
<i>Tues 4 (n = 28)</i>	3 (11%)	25 (89%)
<i>Wed 2 (n = 22)</i>	5 (23%)	17 (77%)
<i>Total (n = 78)</i>	15 (19%)	63 (81%)

The fourth reader in the study, *Nelson Mandela*, where the students read two-thirds of the title, showed lower passing rates than the two previous readers (see Tables 8 & 9). Of course, *Nelson Mandela* was a non-fiction title while the previous three readers in the study were fiction. With a 60% passing threshold, students passed the *Nelson Mandela* quiz at a rate of only 43%. Interestingly, students passed at a much lower percentage than the previous two readers despite reading more (two-thirds) of the reader. And when the passing threshold increased to 70%, only 18% of the students in the study could pass. Perhaps, and this is purely speculation, guessing from context concerning unknown information from a non-fiction reader is far more difficult than that of a predictable fiction reader. Moreover, the quiz questions appear to be a bit more specific and difficult in nature for the *Nelson Mandela* quiz since more detailed information concerning his life was tested.

Table 8. Book 4 ($\frac{2}{3}$ read of *Nelson Mandela*), 60% Passing Threshold

Class	Passed	Not Passed
<i>Tues 3</i> ($n = 28$)	4 (14%)	24 (86%)
<i>Tues 4</i> ($n = 28$)	20 (71%)	8 (29%)
<i>Wed 2</i> ($n = 21$)	9 (43%)	12 (57%)
<i>Total</i> ($n = 77$)	33 (43%)	44 (57%)

Table 9. Book 4 ($\frac{2}{3}$ read of *Nelson Mandela*), 70% Passing Threshold

Class	Passed	Not Passed
<i>Tues 3</i> ($n = 28$)	1 (4%)	27 (96%)
<i>Tues 4</i> ($n = 28$)	10 (36%)	18 (64%)
<i>Wed 2</i> ($n = 21$)	3 (14%)	18 (86%)
<i>Total</i> ($n = 77$)	14 (18%)	63 (82%)

Concerning the fifth and final reader of the study (*Basketball's Greatest Players*), 65% of the students passed the quiz with a passing threshold of 60% (see Tables 10 & 11). This does not seem too surprising since the students read 75% of this title. Having read more than the 60% being tested, in all likelihood, this should be enough to pass the quiz if the quiz questions were evenly distributed across the contents of the reader. With a 70% passing threshold, the percentage dipped to a bit below 50%.

Table 10. Book 5 ($\frac{3}{4}$ read of *Basketball's Greatest Players*), 60% Passing Threshold

Class	Passed	Not Passed
<i>Tues 3</i> ($n = 28$)	17 (61%)	11 (39%)
<i>Tues 4</i> ($n = 26$)	17 (65%)	9 (35%)
<i>Wed 2</i> ($n = 24$)	17 (71%)	7 (29%)
<i>Total</i> ($n = 78$)	51 (65%)	27 (35%)

Table 11 Book 5 ($\frac{3}{4}$ read of *Basketball's Greatest Players*), 70% Passing Threshold

Class	Passed	Not Passed
<i>Tues 3</i> ($n = 28$)	13 (46%)	15 (54%)
<i>Tues 4</i> ($n = 26$)	11 (42%)	15 (58%)
<i>Wed 2</i> ($n = 24$)	13 (54%)	11 (46%)
<i>Total</i> ($n = 78$)	37 (47%)	41 (53%)

Discussion

Table 12. Total Passing Rates, 5 Readers using the MReader

Passing Threshold	Reader 1 ($\frac{1}{4}$ Read)	Reader 2 ($\frac{1}{2}$ Read)	Reader 3 ($\frac{1}{3}$ Read)	Reader 4 ($\frac{2}{3}$ Read)	Reader 5 ($\frac{3}{4}$ Read)
60%	40%	56%	53%	43%	65%
70%	13%	18%	19%	18%	47%

In this section, the research question mentioned previously will be discussed.

1. *What is the appropriate passing threshold for quizzes on the MReader? Is the suggested 60% passing threshold appropriate or is this too easy?*
2. *Can students pass an MReader quiz if the passing threshold is 60% by reading only part of book? Moreover, what would happen if the threshold was raised to 70%?*

Certainly, reading only a portion of a graded reader should not warrant the passing of an MReader quiz. Moreover, rewarding students for reading something that is only partially completed seems unethical and unfair to those students who read the book in its entirety. When the MReader passing threshold is set to 60%, exactly 40% could pass the first reader in the study where they completed only a quarter of the book (see Table 12). Far too many of the students in the study appear to be passing the MReader quizzes for readers two through five as well. Certainly in the study, passing rates should climb as students read more of a reader and this appears to be the case with the fifth reader in the study where students completed three-quarters of the title. Yet the passing rate for the fifth reader (65%) is much easier to accept than that

of the first (a surprising 40%) since most of the fifth reader was completed.

Note that when the passing threshold for MReader quizzes is set to 70%, the number of students in the study passing quizzes when reading only a part of a reader drops substantially. These numbers seem more in line with what is ethical and fair. Certainly, a small percentage of students (less than 20% for the first four readers in the study) could pass when the passing threshold was raised to 70%. A few of these students who could pass even with the higher 70% passing threshold might have randomly been asked an inordinate number of MReader questions from the part of the book that was read. Or perhaps they guessed correctly on questions that they did not know from the reading or maybe they were clever and could guess from context the remainder and outcome of the story by reading only a small part of it. It's unknown how and why these students in the study could still pass the MReader quiz at the higher setting of 70%. Yet the passing rates when the MReader passing threshold is set at 70% seem far more acceptable, fair and ethical than when the passing threshold is set at the lower and suggested 60%.

Another issue that was mentioned only briefly before concerns students who attempt non-fiction MReader quizzes without actually doing the reading. These students are hoping to pass the quiz with sufficient background knowledge on the topic. Indeed, this is a very small problem in that only a few students are “gaming the system”, trolling the MReader system for easy quizzes, and circumventing the task of reading. By raising the MReader passing threshold to 70%, it is certainly more difficult for these students to game the system.

Finally, let's look at the data for the three classes in the study concerning the quizzes taken during the semester excluding the five readers from the study (see Table 13).

Table 13. Three classes total (Threshold 59 or Below Fail) Excluding 5 books in treatment

<i>Quizzes (n = 1736)</i>	Passed	Not Passed
60%+	1393 (80%)	343 (20%)
70%+	1144 (66%)	592 (34%)

The 82 students in the three classes took a total of 1736 quizzes. Doing a simple count

of quizzes passed at 60% or above on the MReader for the students in the study only, the total comes to 1393 or an 80% rate of passing. When quizzes were passed at 70% or above on the MReader, the total comes to 1144 or a 66% passing rate. We are looking at a 14% difference in the rate of passing.

However, when we look at the entire ER program for a single semester (see Table 14), only 10% of the quizzes taken score in the range of 60%-69%. In fact, nearly 75% of all students who pass quizzes get a score of more than 70% on the MReader. And slightly more than a quarter of all quizzes taken have a “Not Passed” score of 69% or below. Again, students who complete a graded reader and comprehend it, should score highly on the MReader quiz and pass the quiz and this appears to be exactly what is happening. In effect, setting the MReader passing threshold at 70% will have few negative consequences for those students reading at an easy and appropriate level and completing readers.

Table 14. ER program Totals (21377 quizzes taken)

Quiz Score	Number of quizzes in range
<i>59% or Below</i>	3531 (17%)
<i>60-69%</i>	2158 (10%)
<i>70-79%</i>	3475 (16%)
<i>80-89%</i>	5376 (25%)
<i>90-99%</i>	6837 (32%)
<i>Total 70% +</i>	15688 (73.4%)
<i>Total 69% -</i>	5689 (26.6%)

Recommendation

There is no question that the MReader is a valuable tool for any ER program. Yet the recommended setting of 60% to pass an MReader quiz appears to be too low. Again, the main objective in any ER program is for students to read vast amounts in their L2, at or near their comprehension level. The MReader is perhaps the easiest and best way to ensure that students have an adequate understanding of what it is they read. For the students, taking an MReader quiz takes very little time. Typically, a quiz will take a student five minutes, but the system allows for a maximum of ten minutes. Following the MReader quiz, students can then quickly get back to the main task of

reading. For teachers, the MReader provides an easily accessible accounting of what students have read and how much. It is also a mechanism whereby teachers know that their students are reading at a reasonable comprehension level. Teachers can easily see those that are successfully reading and praise them. Conversely, those who are not reading much can be prodded to do so.

Students should not be falsely rewarded for books that are partially read or completed without a sufficient level of comprehension. Setting the MReader passing threshold at 60% appears to be setting the bar a bit too low, while a 70% passing threshold seems better at holding students accountable for their reading. The 70% passing threshold still allows for a basic *adequate* comprehension level and students can read quickly, maintaining fluency. Moreover, having the higher passing threshold of 70% will also help to prevent students from gaming the system and taking quizzes without having completed the reader. Finally, since the data shows that most students pass MReader quizzes at a score 70% or more anyway, why not set the passing threshold there from the outset. This seems to be a prudent course of action and sound pedagogically based on the findings of this study.

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