

Continuing the Formative Evaluation of an Extensive Reading Course

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Abstract

This paper reports on a longitudinal evaluation of four academic years of the Extensive Reading (ER) component of an Academic Skills (AS) course for first-year undergraduates at a Japanese university from 2018 to 2021. In April 2020, ER transitioned from a face-to-face environment with physical books to an online one with digital resources due to COVID-19. This inevitably had consequences. This paper begins by outlining the teaching context and term-specific course structure. It then details the changes made as a result of the pandemic before exploring the effectiveness of each term by continuing the preliminary analysis begun by Klassen and Allan (2018). Data collection comprises word counts, vocabulary level testing, timed-reading speeds, and student feedback. Analysis suggests that students generally met the course aims in both the face-to-face and online environments by accomplishing word count reading targets, and improving their reading speeds and knowledge of high-frequency lexis. Student feedback was generally positive, but key areas are highlighted as needing improvement. Suggestions for how ER might be administered more effectively based on these insights are offered.

This paper's first purpose is to document the development of the Extensive Reading (ER) component of an Academic Skills (AS) course initially reported on by Klassen and Allan (2018). The second is to continue the formative evaluation process that their study began. Accordingly, this paper examines the degree to which ER course aims were met through four academic years (AY) from AY2018 to AY2021. Before AY2020, ER was taught in classrooms with physical books. However, due to COVID-19, it migrated to a virtual learning space with digital materials in April 2020, where it remained until March 2022. The implications of this are examined within a broader appraisal of ER's effectiveness. Evaluation is based on Klassen and Allan's (2018) approach of: 1) word counts reflecting the amount of ER accomplished; 2) Vocabulary Level Testing to chart knowledge growth of the 2,000- and 3,000-word levels; 3) timed reading scores charting reading speed gains; and 4) student feedback. The paper begins with a literature review and a course summary. Evaluation of each academic term follows. It ends with suggestions for how ER might be administered more effectively in the future.

Literature Review

Nakanishi (2014) provided two definitions of ER: a pedagogical one concerned with learners reading large amounts of easily understood and enjoyable materials to develop proficiency in the target language, and a process-oriented one that describes “a way of processing text fluently and with high levels of comprehension” (p. 14). Bamford and Day (1997) explained that ER is differentiated from intensive reading, which aims to understand detailed language features through close text analysis, as opposed to the general comprehension, pleasure and fluency gains ER associates with.

Several benefits relate ER’s value to language learning. These include reading fluency gains (Nation, 2009); vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2015); improved writing, listening and speaking (Helgesen, 2005); positive attitudes about reading (Day, 2013); and motivation for language learning (Day & Bamford, 1998). Nation (1997) also noted that what makes ER pedagogically attractive is that different levels of proficiency can be catered for in the same course, learners read what they want, and there is scope for learning beyond classrooms.

Various elements have been identified for teaching ER effectively. The most influential are perhaps Day and Bamford’s (2002) 10 principles. These are: 1) ease of content; 2) a wide range of books/topics; 3) self-selection; 4) reading as much as possible; 5) reading for pleasure; 6) reading as its own reward; 7) fast reading speeds; 8) individual, silent practice; 9) teachers as guides; and 10) teachers as role models (pp. 137-140). Day (2015) reviewed which principles were most frequently featured in 44 studies of ER programs and concluded these to be easy material, wide topic variety, ability to self-select, reading as much as possible, and reading for pleasure and general understanding (p. 295).

Graded readers are seen as ideal for ER (Day, 2013). Graded readers are fictional or nonfictional texts with controlled language complexity to suit a specific readership’s proficiency. They aim to place learners inside a “reading comfort zone” (Day, 2013, p. 11), to achieve “reading gain without reading pain” (Day and Bamford, 1998, p. 121). Macalister (2015) argued that Day and Bamford’s (2002) suggested target of at least one graded reader a week was too vague, but more specific annual word counts have been suggested. Beglar and Hunt (2014) reported 200,000 as a baseline for reading rate improvements. Nishizawa et al. (2010) positioned it at 300,000, while others put it even higher at 450,000 (Klassen & Green, 2019) and 500,000 (Nation, 2009). Nation’s rationale is simply that “if you increase the input, you increase the learning” (Iswandari & Paradit, 2019).

Technological advances have prompted appraisals of physical and digital reading materials. Myrberg (2017) summarized the advantages of eBooks as portability, font size, search options, and embedded dictionaries. Conversely, eBook disadvantages include eye strain, variable navigation and annotation functionality, and greater susceptibility to distractions when reading. Myrberg and Wiberg (2015) examined screen and paper-based reading and found a general preference for physical books. Key factors were the ability to judge reading progress and tactile appreciation. However, habit and familiarity may play a role in this judgement. In keeping with Myrberg and Wiberg’s (2015) findings, students’ preferences for printed over digital materials have also been identified (Campbell, et al., 2021; Foasberg, 2011). However, the benefits of eBook convenience and cost led Johnston and Salaz (2019) to conclude that “neither format is superior in all contexts” (p. 142). Thompson and Tsuji (2020) also suggested awareness training might help reduce aversions to digital readers.

A platform that is receiving increased attention from ER programs is Xreading. This virtual library houses graded readers and collects data on reading performance. Studies into its effectiveness and appeal found students’ attitudes to be quite positive but engagement with ER

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lower than hoped for (Campbell, et al., 2021; Cote & Milliner, 2015; Howarth & Bollen, 2019, 2020; Milliner & Cote, 2015). Conversely, Puripunyanich (2021) encountered increased engagement and praise for Xreading's convenience, functionality, text variety, and perceived learning benefits. Negative reflections cited problematic functionality, lack of graded readers, and eye strain leading the author to conclude that a clear introduction to Xreading is essential for first-time users to help facilitate better understanding of the platform.

Course Overview

Extensive Reading (ER) is a core component of the Academic Skills (AS) course in the English for Liberal Arts (ELA) program. It is required for all first years in Stream 4 (TOEFL ITP 350-480, CEFR A2/B1), a student body of around 120 learners. Students are placed into one of six sections with an average class size of 20. This drops to 15-17 in the Autumn and Winter as students who join summer study abroad programs receive partial AS credits and do not take ER thereafter. Terms last 10 weeks during which ER is taken weekly in 70-minute lessons.

Course design aligns with Waring and McLean's (2015) key elements of "fluent comprehension, high reading speed, reading large amounts of text, [and] focus on meaning of text" (p. 162). Classroom application are shaped by Nation's (2007) four strands framework, which delineates Spring tasks into *meaning-focused input*, by reading graded readers during Sustained Silent Reading (SSR); *meaning-focused output*, by taking summary and reaction notes and discussing texts with partners; *fluency development*, through timed-reading tasks (Quinn, et al., 2007); and *language-focused learning*, by learning 100 new words per term. Lesson time is divided across the four strands equally.

In the next two terms, lesson structure and focus change. SSR occurs outside lessons only and timed reading practice no longer features. Class time is used to prepare for and participate in reading circle discussions, followed by vocabulary review. In Autumn, Literature is targeted exclusively and books are chosen by groups, not individuals. Students also rotate through specific roles: *Discussion Leader*, *Summarizer*, *Connector*, *Passage Person*, *Word Master*, and *Cultural Connector* (Furr, 2011). In Winter, fiction becomes nonfiction. Texts are chosen by groups, but groups are reduced to 2-3 members. Less scaffolding is provided for discussions, which focus on text summaries, cultural connections, and students' own questions.

After AY2019, the ELA approved raising word counts for Spring, Autumn, and Winter from 70,000, 100,000, and 130,000 to 100,000, 150,000, and 200,000 to help increase exposure to high-frequency language. It was hoped that the additional 150,000 words would have a positive impact on learning by increasing exposure to reading high-frequency language (Klassen, 2020). However, in April 2020, COVID-19 forced all learning online. Organising this led to the term being reduced from 10 to 8 weeks. As access to physical books in the university's library was prohibited, digital resources were used via Xreading and lessons took place on Zoom. Initially, the Spring word count was 100,000. However, in June 2020, Xreading required a system upgrade and technical difficulties during this rendered the library inaccessible for a further week. The Spring word count was cut to 90,000, Autumn stayed at 100,000, and Winter became 110,000. AY2021 goals were later increased to 100,000, 110,000, and 120,000.

COVID-19 affected ER in other ways. Firstly, students had to be trained to use Xreading, ending the trend of using MReader quizzes with physical books. Vocabulary cards also moved from hardcopy flashcards to digital records. In AY2020, these were listed in Google Documents, while in AY2021 the digital flashcard platform Quizlet was introduced.

Course Evaluations

In Klassen and Allan (2018), the Spring term was positively evaluated. Data came in four parts: 1) word count totals via MReader.org reflecting ER accomplishment; 2) baseline vocabulary levels using the Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) (Schmitt, et al., 2001) to measure potential annual knowledge growth of the 2K and 3K levels (i.e. words in the first 2,000 and 3,000 words of English in terms of frequency); 3) word-per-minute (wpm) reading speeds recorded at the start and end of term; and, 4) student survey feedback. Although only partial data were available, most students whose totals were known ($n = 62$) met the 70,000-word target ($M = 72,464$; $SD = 17,590$). VLT scores were documented for later comparison with Winter scores (see Table 3). VLT scores word-frequency bands out of 30 points with 27+ (i.e. 90%) indicating strong band knowledge. Spring figures demonstrated good understanding of the 2K band ($M = 25.88$; $SD = 4.49$; $n = 121$) and slightly lower understanding of the less commonly encountered words in the 3K range ($M = 21.44$; $SD = 5.55$; $n = 121$). Timed reading scores in Week 2 ($M = 139$ wpm; $SD = 25.15$; $n = 122$) were compared with Week 9's ($M = 215.2$ wpm, $SD = 55.06$) and improvements were shown to be statistically significant. Lastly, student feedback was overwhelmingly positive regarding reading speed and vocabulary gains, and a deepening of cultural and general knowledge. They felt confident selecting books (83.3%), that the reading in class (77.4%) and outside (80%) were manageable, and that MReader was easy to use (60.9%). Points to improve included more SSR, timed-reading practice, and vocabulary review. Significantly, 62% of responses requested no change.

Various types of evaluation data were collected through AY2018-2021 due to the impact of COVID-19, which prevented consistent types being collected across all years. Word counts were recorded via MReader in AY2018-2019 and Xreading in AY2020-2021. The VLT was paper-based in AY2018-2019 but digital from AY2020, as were all timed reading practices. Unfortunately, surveys were not administered to all ER sections each term leading to varying response rates. It is with awareness of these factors that the following evaluation is offered.

Word Count Targets and Amounts of ER Completed by Students

Table 1 shows average ER amounts completed annually from students whose totals are known. In all years, students either exceeded or came close to the goal. The highest amount was in AY2021 ($M = 320,126$; $SD = 62,122$) when the goal was also highest at 330,000. The least was in AY2018 ($M = 274,337$, $SD = 103,631$). Interestingly, students that read for the fewest total weeks in 2020 had the highest weekly reading average for the year ($M = 10,929$).

Table 1

Annual Extensive Reading Amounts Completed by Students in AY 2018-2021

	AY2018 ($n = 65$)	AY2019 ($n = 50$)	AY2020 ($n = 121$)	AY2021 ($n = 86$)
Annual Goal	300,000	300,000	300,000	330,000
<i>M</i>	280,550	316,232	295,089	320,126
<i>SD</i>	93,126	60,671	58,660	62,122

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% of goal read	93.5	105.4	98.4	97
Total weeks	30	30	27	30
Weekly avg.	9,351	10,541	10,929	10,670

Table 2 shows word count goals and amounts of ER completed in the Spring term of AY2018, AY2020, and AY2021. As no AY2019 data beyond the annual totals remains, this year is excluded from this table (and Tables 3-4). Again, most students attained or almost attained the goals. The most ER completed in a Spring term was in AY2021 ($M = 115,660$; $SD = 20,097$) when the goal was highest at 100,000. Conversely, the least amount of ER completed came in 2018, when most students achieved the 70,000 target ($M = 72,464$, $SD = 17,590$). In 2020, the Spring term was only 7 weeks so the average words read per week is noteworthy at 12,754 - the highest weekly average of any term in any year.

Table 2

Spring Extensive Reading Amounts Completed by Students in AY2018, AY2020-2021

	AY2018 ($n = 62$)	AY2020 ($n = 122$)	AY2021 ($n = 107$)
Spring Goal	70,000	90,000	100,000
M	72,464	85,928	115,660
SD	17,590	16,458	28,097
% of goal read	103.5	95.5	115.7
Weekly avg.	7,264	12,754	11,556

Table 3 shows word count goals and amounts of ER completed in the Autumn term of AY2018, AY2020, and AY2021. The largest amount was read in AY2020, when most students exceeded the 100,000 target ($M = 105,425$, $SD = 16,727$). The lowest amount read was in 2018 ($M = 72,464$, $SD = 17,590$). Interestingly, in 2021, students who had achieved an average of 115,660 words in the Spring, read noticeably less ($M = 98,883$, $SD = 27,275$). This might be explained by some of the stronger readers who went on to participate in the summer SEA Program not continuing in ER on their return to Japan.

Table 3

Autumn Extensive Reading Amounts Completed by Students in AY2018, AY2020-2021

	AY2018 ($n = 66$)	AY2020 ($n = 118$)	AY2021 ($n = 87$)
Autumn Goal	100,000	100,000	110,000
M	88,105	105,425	98,883
SD	29,998	16,727	27,275
% of goal read	88.1	105.4	89.9
Weekly avg.	8,811	10,543	9,883

Table 4 shows word count goals and amounts of ER completed in the Winter term of AY2018, AY2020, and AY2021. The highest amount of ER completed by students was in

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AY2018, when the goal peaked at 130,000 ($M = 115,469$, $SD = 20,097$). By contrast, the lowest amount read by students was in 2020, when students that had on average exceeded 100,000 words in the Autumn were unable to do so again ($M = 99,529$, $SD = 19,546$).

Table 4

Winter Extensive Reading Amounts Completed by Students in AY2018, AY2020-2021

	AY2018 ($n = 62$)	AY2020 ($n = 117$)	AY2021 ($n = 86$)
Winter Goal	130,000	110,000	120,000
M	115,469	99,529	109,824
SD	36,879	19,546	22,317
% of goal read	88.8	90.5	91.5
Weekly avg.	11,547	9,953	10,982

Vocabulary Knowledge Levels

Table 5 shows the Vocabulary Level Test results for the 2,000 (2K) and 3,000 (3K) word bands. The tests were first administered in Lesson 2 of Spring and again in February at the end of the Winter term. Levels were scored out of 30 with 90% (27/30) indicating good knowledge of each band. In all years, students demonstrated growth in their 2K and 3K level knowledge. The largest gain in the 2K band was in AY2019 at $M = 1.45$ (from 25.41 to 26.86) while the smallest was in AY2020 at $M = 1.02$ (from 27.08 to 28.10). In April of AY2020 and AY2021, students recorded average scores over 27/30, which reflected their generally stronger vocabulary knowledge than their AY2018 and AY2019 predecessors, whose average scores were below 26/30.

For the 3K word band, the data reveals the largest growth was also in AY2019, which rose by $M = 3.18$ (from 19.81 to 22.99) while the smallest gain came in AY2018 at $M = 0.63$ (from 21.44 to 22.07). In all years, students were on average unable to reach the 90% threshold for the 3K band to be considered comfortable to read. However, the AY2020 and AY2021 students were on average higher at $M = 25.45$ and $M = 25.56$ in February than in AY2018 and AY2019 students who were 22.07 and 22.99 respectively.

Table 5

Vocabulary Knowledge Level Tests for 2,000-3,000 Levels in AY2018-2021

	AY2018 ($n = 122^*$)		AY2019 ($n = 88$)		AY2020 ($n = 60$)		AY2021 ($n = 50$)	
2K level	Apr	Feb	Apr	Feb	Apr	Feb	Apr	Feb
M	25.88	27.07	25.41	26.86	27.08	28.17	27.20	28.24
SD	4.49	3.31	3.72	3.33	3.22	3.99	3.08	2.12
Avg. growth	1.19		1.45		1.02		1.04	
3K level	Apr	Feb	Apr	Feb	Apr	Feb	Apr	Feb
M	21.44	22.07	19.81	22.09	21.21	25.45	23.92	25.56
SD	5.55	5.68	5.40	4.42	6.34	3.68	3.49	3.53
Avg. growth	0.63		3.18		2.53		1.64	

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* $n = 121$ for 3K in April; $n = 84$ for 2K/3K in Feb

Reading Speeds

Table 6 shows timed reading speeds in words per minute (wpm) from Week 2 and Week 9 in Spring (Week 7 in AY2020). In all cases, students reported reading speed gains. The largest of these gains was in AY2018 with an average rise of 75 wpm from the only group to cross the 200-wpm threshold. AY2019 students also increased their reading speeds by 60 wpm, while more modest gains came from students in the online courses taught in AY2020 and AY2021. In AY2020, the average reading speed grew by 32 wpm while AY2021 it rose by 38 wpm. Interestingly, knowledge of both bands was generally stronger in AY2020-AY2021 but this did not translate to faster reading rates.

Table 6

Timed Reading Speeds in Words Per Minute (WPM) in Spring AY2018-2021

	AY2018 ($n = 122$)		AY2019 ($n = 90$)		AY2020 ($n = 110$)		AY2021 ($n = 103$)	
Week	2	9	2	9	2	9	2	9
<i>M</i>	140	215	132	192	134	166	131	169
<i>SD</i>	25.15	55.06	28.98	52.18	31.22	49.84	27.18	46.45
Avg. growth	75		60		32		38	

Student Feedback Surveys

Different survey data types were collected across AY2018-AY2021. In Spring AY2018, Likert scale responses and open questions were used. In Autumn and Winter AY2018, a reduced 3-item open comment format was used to target good points of ER, points to improve, and graded readers in the university library. Feedback from these two end-of-term surveys led to more library purchases after students indicated a need for more titles and more copies of the same texts. In AY2019, surveys were limited to two open questions on positive course aspects and areas to improve. However, from AY2020, a more detailed survey akin to Spring AY2018 returned. Based on available data, comparisons are made across the four academic years.

Students' General Perceptions of ER in the Spring Term

End-of-term survey feedback for Spring AY2018, was very positive (Klassen and Allan, 2018). Students perceived clear reading speed and vocabulary gains, as well as a deepening of cultural and general knowledge from what they had read. They felt confident in selecting appropriate books (83.3%), that the reading workload was manageable in class (77.4%) and outside it (80%), and that MReader was easy to use for most (60.9%). Identified points to improve included more time in class for SSR, timed-reading practice, and vocabulary review. There were also requests for more teacher instruction and more book variety. Significantly, 62% of all responses requested no changes.

Table 7 shows similarly positive findings in the Spring survey data covering AY2020-AY2021. Students in AY2020 perceived noted reading speeds increases ($M = 4.13$; $SD = 1.06$) as did students in AY2021 ($M = 4.28$; $SD = 0.91$). Moderately improved vocabulary was also reported in AY2020 ($M = 3.79$; $SD = 0.96$) whereas even greater gains were felt by AY2021 students ($M = 4.06$; $SD = 0.79$). Xreading's book variety was deemed interesting by a small

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majority in AY2020 ($M = 3.88$; $SD = 1.18$) and this endorsement rose in AY2021 ($M = 4.03$; $SD = 1.06$) perhaps as a result of new titles added by the service provider. Other data in these surveys also suggested that for most respondents the amount of reading in Spring outside class was “appropriate” (81.3% in 2020; 79.6% in 2021), as was the amount of reading completed inside lesson time (85.7% in 2020; 76.7% in 2021). This was similar to AY2018.

Table 7

Selected Results of Student Feedback on Course Evaluation in Spring AY2020-2021

Survey Items	AY2020 ($n = 112$)	AY2021 ($n = 103$)
The course helped me to increase my reading speed.	$M = 4.13$ $SD = 1.06$	$M = 4.28$ $SD = 0.91$
The course helped me to develop my vocabulary.	$M = 3.79$ $SD = 0.96$	$M = 4.06$ $SD = 0.79$
Xreading.com had a variety of interesting books to choose from.	$M = 3.88$ $SD = 1.18$	$M = 4.03$ $SD = 1.06$

Notes. Likert Scale responses of 1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree.

Open Comments about Positive Course Aspects in the Spring Term. High response rates were collected each year about positive course aspects in ER. Table 8 provides a summary of the most frequently referenced of these. In all three years, reading speed gains featured high on the list of most positive features (30.8% in AY2019; 21.9% in AY2020; and 18.0% in AY2021). The actual amount of ER that students were able to read was also quite highly rated (12.5% in AY2019; 27.6% in AY2020; and 18.9% in AY2021). The enjoyment factor (i.e. Motivation), the timed reading practice tasks that took place at the start and end of every lesson, and perceived gains in vocabulary knowledge were all identified in the data too.

Table 8

Positive Course Aspects Identified by Students in the Spring Term AY2019-2021

AY2019 ($n = 120$)	AY2020 ($n = 105$)	AY2021 ($n = 111$)
Reading speed gains (30.8%)	Total amount read (27.6%)	Total amount read (18.9%)
Timed reading (13.3%)	Reading speed gains (21.9%)	Reading speed gains (18.0%)
Motivation (12.5%)	Motivation (18.1%)	More text variety (9.9%)
Total amount read (12.5%)	Timed reading (12.4%)	Timed reading (6.3%)
Vocabulary gains (10.8%)	Vocabulary gains (8.6%)	Vocabulary gains (6.3%)

Open Comments about Course Aspects to Improve in the Spring Term. Fewer comments were received on aspects to improve than on positives in Spring. Table 9 provides a summary of the most frequently referenced of these. In all three years, allowing students to have more in-class discussion opportunities was a popular target of constructive criticism (7.6% in AY2019; 14.3% in AY2020; and 12.2% in AY2021). A similar degree of interest was placed on increased text variety (12.1% in AY2019; 12.0% in AY2020; and 22.0% in AY2021). A

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handful of other topics that were raised by more than one respondent are also included. However, in what is an encouraging feature of the data, in two of the three years, the most popular responses were to make no changes at all (25.8% in AY2019; and 26.2% in AY2020), while in the other year, it was the second most popular target (at 17.1% in AY2021).

Table 9

Course Aspects to Improve Identified by Students in the Spring Term AY2019-2021

AY2019 (n = 66)	AY2020 (n = 42)	AY2021 (n = 41)
More text variety (12.1%)	More discussion (14.3%)	More text variety (22.0%)
MReader quizzes (9.1%)	More text variety (12.0%)	More discussion (12.2%)
Vocabulary approach (7.6%)	Xreading usability (9.5%)	More timed reading (4.8%)
More discussion (7.6%)	More timed reading (2.3%)	Screen fatigue (4.8%)
		Teacher suggested texts (4.8%)
No changes (25.8%)	No changes (26.2%)	No changes (17.1%)

Students' General Perceptions of ER in the Autumn Term

As in Spring AY2020 and AY2021, Autumn students perceived improvements in reading speeds and vocabulary. Table 10 shows that in AY2020, students reported increases in their reading speeds ($M = 4.04$; $SD = 1.00$) as did students in AY2021 ($M = 4.23$; $SD = 0.94$). Beyond this, vocabulary gains were evident in AY2020, although they not overly pronounced ($M = 3.80$; $SD = 0.97$), while in AY2021 such improvements were felt more keenly ($M = 4.11$; $SD = 0.86$). AY2021 students also felt that Xreading's book choices were only moderately interesting ($M = 3.51$; $SD = 1.23$) whereas in AY2020, the endorsement was stronger ($M = 4.09$; $SD = 1.05$). Other data in these surveys also suggested that the amount of reading in Autumn outside class was "appropriate" in both years (83.1% in AY2020; 70.0% in AY2021). As Autumn lessons contain no Sustained Silent Reading, no data was collected on reading in class.

Table 10

Selected Results of Student Feedback on Course Evaluation in Autumn AY2020-2021

Survey Items	AY2020 (n = 89)	AY2021 (n = 80)
The course helped me to increase my reading speed.	$M = 4.04$ $SD = 1.00$	$M = 4.23$ $SD = 0.94$
The course helped me to develop my vocabulary.	$M = 3.80$ $SD = 0.97$	$M = 4.11$ $SD = 0.86$
Xreading.com had a variety of interesting books to choose from.	$M = 3.51$ $SD = 1.23$	$M = 4.09$ $SD = 1.05$

Notes. Likert Scale responses of 1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree.

Open Comments about Positive Course Aspects in the Autumn Term. Response rates regarding positive course aspects for the Autumn terms were less abundant than in the Spring. Table 11 provides a summary of the most frequently referenced of these Autumn

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positives. In all four years, group discussions were the clear first-choices (59.7% in AY2018; 47.6% in AY2019; 34.8% in AY2020; and 34.3% in AY2021). Reading speed gains were also highlighted in varying degrees of popularity (6.0% in AY2018; 15.9% in AY2019; 20.7% in AY2020; and 10.4% in AY2021). Beyond these, a range of other elements were noted including general motivation for reading literature and the specific roles that students took during lessons.

Table 11

Positive Course Aspects Identified by Students in the Autumn Term AY2018-2021

AY2018 (n = 67)	AY2019 (n = 63)	AY2020 (n = 92)	AY2021 (n = 67)
Discussion (59.7%)	Discussion (47.6%)	Discussion (34.8%)	Discussion (34.3%)
Reading speed (6.0%)	Reading speed (15.9%)	Member roles (20.7%)	Motivation (13.4%)
Motivation (6.0%)	Total amount read (15.9%)	Reading speed (7.6%)	Reading speed (10.4%)
Text variety (6.0%)	Motivation (14.3%)	Total amount read (7.6%)	Vocabulary gains (9.0%)
Member roles (3.0%)	Member roles (9.5%)	Motivation (6.5%)	Member roles (7.5%)

Open Comments about Course Aspects to Improve in the Autumn Term. Response rates on course aspects to improve in Autumn were again not as high as in Spring. Table 12 provides a summary of the most frequently referenced of these aspects. In the first two years, insufficient book choice and a lack of multiple copies of the same titles were rated as the biggest issues (27.6% in AY2018; 48.5% in AY2019). These were problematic given that all members of a group need their own copy of the same text. If a text has previously been read by one member of a group but not the other members, it disqualifies that same book from being selected twice. This made choosing new books harder as the course progressed. In AY2020, when Xreading was used for the first time, needing multiple copies of any text ceased to be an issue as digital ones can be opened and read by any number of students at the same time. However, a lack of variety was still noted (20.6%). Other targets mentioned by multiple year groups included the limitations of having to choose books by group consensus, the term's reading goal being too large, and the need for more frequent group rotation. Against all these, responses indicating no changes were needed were returned in all years too (8.5% in AY2018; 12.12% in AY2019; 14.7% in AY2020; and a majority 30.4% in AY2021).

Table 12

Course Aspects to Improve Identified by Students in the Autumn Term AY2018-2021

AY2018 (n = 47)	AY2019 (n = 33)	AY2020 (n = 34)	AY2021 (n = 23)
More text variety/more copies (27.6%)	More text variety/more copies (48.5%)	More text variety (20.6%)	More rotations (8.7%)
Smaller groups (10.6%)	Smaller goal (9.1%)	Smaller goal (14.7%)	Vocabulary approach (8.7%)
More time reading (8.5%)	More autonomy (6.1%)	More discussion (11.8%)	More autonomy (8.7%)
		More rotations (5.9%)	
No changes (8.5%)	No changes (12.1%)	No changes (14.7%)	No changes (30.4%)

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Students' General Perceptions of ER in the Winter Term

As in the first two terms of AY2020 and AY2021, Winter students in these year groups continued to perceive improvements in their reading speeds and, to a slightly lesser extent, in their vocabulary. Table 13 shows that in Winter, most AY2020 students perceived faster reading speeds ($M = 4.11$; $SD = 0.95$) just as AY2021 students did too ($M = 4.00$; $SD = 1.00$). Moderate vocabulary improvements were reported in AY2020 ($M = 3.85$; $SD = 0.93$) and AY2021 ($M = 3.71$; $SD = 1.02$). Xreading's variety of interesting books was less endorsed in AY2020 ($M = 3.22$; $SD = 1.27$) and AY2021 ($M = 3.17$; $SD = 1.22$) than it had been in the prior two terms. As for reading amounts outside lessons, significantly fewer students in AY2020 deemed a 110,000-word count target to be "appropriate" (54.0%) than students in the previous two winter terms had. In AY2021, this downward trend continued as the majority of students reported that the goal, which was then 120,000 words, was "too much" (54.3%). This was the first time that more than half of all respondents negatively evaluated a term's reading goal.

Table 13
Selected Results of Student Feedback on Course Evaluation in Winter AY 2020-2021

Survey Items	AY2020 ($n = 87$)	AY2021 ($n = 35$)
The course helped me to increase my reading speed.	$M = 4.11$ $SD = 0.95$	$M = 4.00$ $SD = 1.00$
The course helped me to develop my vocabulary.	$M = 3.85$ $SD = 0.93$	$M = 3.71$ $SD = 1.02$
Xreading.com had a variety of interesting books to choose from.	$M = 3.22$ $SD = 1.27$	$M = 3.17$ $SD = 1.22$

Notes. Likert Scale responses of 1= strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree.

Open Comments about Positive Course Aspects in the Winter Term. Response rates on positive aspects of the Winter were comparatively limited. Table 14 provides a summary of the most frequently referenced of these aspects. In all years, group discussions were the most highly rated feature (53.2% in AY2018; 15.4% in AY2019; 25.0% in AY2020; and 39.3% in AY2021). This reflected the same positive attitudes about group work that the Autumn surveys garnered. Beyond discussion, the focus on nonfiction was highlighted in three of the four years (17% in AY2018; 23.6% in AY2020; and 7.1% in AY2021). The positive effect on motivation for reading was also duly noted (17.0% in AY2018; 18.1% in AY2020; and 17.9% in AY2021), as were a handful of year-specific other positive factors.

Table 14
Positive Course Aspects Identified by Students in the Winter Term AY2018-2021

AY2018 ($n = 47$)	AY2019 ($n = 52$)	AY2020 ($n = 72$)	AY2021 ($n = 28$)
Discussion (53.2%)	Discussion (15.4%)	Discussion (25.0%)	Discussion (39.3%)
Motivation (17.0%)	Reading speed (9.6%)	Nonfiction (23.6%)	Motivation (17.9%)
Nonfiction (17.0%)	Vocabulary (5.8%)	Motivation (18.1%)	Text variety (10.7%)

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Text variety (3.8%)	Reading speed (11.1%)	Nonfiction focus (7.1%)
Generating discussion questions (3.8%)	Member roles (9.7%)	

Open Comments about Course Aspects to Improve in the Winter Term. Response rates about Winter aspects to improve were the lowest of all three terms. Table 15 shows that insufficient text variety (and insufficient copies of the same titles in AY2018-2019) were evidence in all four years (14.9% in AY2018; 17.5% in AY2019; 22.5% in AY2020; and 17.6% in AY2021). This was the only consistent criticism across the period of investigation, but a number of year-specific areas to improve were also recorded.

Table 15
Course Aspects to Improve Identified by Students in the Winter Term AY2018-2021

AY2018 (<i>n</i> = 47)	AY2019 (<i>n</i> = 40)	AY2020 (<i>n</i> = 40)	AY2021 (<i>n</i> = 17)
Allow fiction (23.4%)	Vocabulary (20%)	More text variety (22.5%)	More text variety (17.6%)
More text variety/more copies (14.9%)	Generating discussion questions (17.5%)	Vocabulary (12.5%)	Allow physical books (17.6%)
Smaller goal (12.8%)	More text variety/more copies (17.5%)	Less preparation time for discussions (12.5%)	
		More timed reading (5%)	
No changes (19.1%)	No changes (7.5%)	No changes (7.5%)	No changes (11.8%)

Discussion and Future Recommendations

From Autumn AY2018 to Winter AY2021, the ER component appears to have been successful in meeting its aims. Firstly, the majority of students achieved the target word counts. Most also reported gains in reading speeds and vocabulary knowledge levels. While these gains cannot be attributed to ER alone as students take many ELA classes, these findings are nonetheless encouraging. Finally, term-specific feedback about ER was generally positive, especially in the Spring. This bodes well for the future.

However, there are aspects of ER that could be improved, particularly in the Autumn and Winter. Although these terms were generally well liked and, for the most part, seen as effective, both are a departure from the core lesson activities that define the Spring. Given this, it might be helpful to make small but potentially significant changes so that aspects which currently only feature in Spring are present in some capacity throughout the year. Towards that end, the following recommendations are offered.

The annual amount of ER targeted has risen since Spring AY2018, and it could be advantageous for students' development to raise goals further in the future if such increases are handled carefully. As of AY2021, the annual target is 330,000 words divided over three 10-week terms with incremental increases of 10,000 words per term starting at 100,000 in Spring. This marks a change from AY2018 when the goal rose by 30,000 each term from 70,000 in Spring. It seems that students view smaller increases from a relatively higher starting point at

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the start of the academic year as more manageable and motivating. This could be significant if the Spring goal is raised above 100,000 words, and if the next two terms increase too.

While most students met the word count targets, feedback on reading amounts outside class in Autumn and Winter was increasingly less favourable. Winter survey responses indicated clear resistance to the goal, particularly in 2021 when more people felt it was too much than did not. A combination of factors may have contributed to this. Firstly, some students reported feeling much busier in courses outside ER in Winter than in previous terms. Some also felt constrained, not only by exclusively reading Literature in Autumn and nonfiction in Winter, but also by being governed by a group-text selection process. In order to maintain motivation, these misgivings should be duly considered, especially if word count increases are implemented. Students should feel boosted rather than burdened by course targets.

One Spring term aspect that might benefit the other terms is timed reading practice. In Spring, students reported being motivated by this practice and the reading speed gains they received. Doing two timed readings per lesson in the Autumn and Winter may not be practical for time reasons, but once per class may be feasible. Some feedback suggested reducing discussion preparation, and this time could be reallocated for timed reading practice in these later terms. Additional speed-reading texts would be needed for this.

In Spring, students typically read multiple books per week, but in Autumn and Winter, groups tended to read just one longer text of 10,000 words between lessons. An alternative approach might be adopted here: if the length of group texts were shorter, e.g. 5,000-7,000 words, the remaining weekly word count of 4,000-6,000 words could be applied to individually selected titles. One advantage is that shorter texts are more likely to be read in time for group discussions. Beyond this, for students who feel restricted by groups choosing texts by majority preference, additional choice and control over what is individually read could be motivating.

Another Spring feature that Autumn and Winter lessons might benefit from is SSR, i.e. Sustained Silent Reading. In Spring, students complete 20 minutes of SSR in class. In Autumn and Winter, incorporating SSR, even for 10 minutes, could be helpful. Ideally, group texts will already have been read before coming to class, but if not, this time could be used to do so. For other students, SSR could be used to read their self-selected books. The existing lesson structure in the Autumn and Winter is normally: *Preparation > Discussion > Vocabulary review > Next text selection*. Feasibly it could be: *Timed-reading practice > SSR > Preparation > Discussion > Vocabulary review > Next text selection*. Timing would need to be adjusted for this.

To facilitate stronger discussions in Autumn and Winter, students could receive more formal scaffolding to help generate more effective discussion questions. Feedback suggested that failure in group discussions often resulted from poor discussion questions that did not adequately address the target text's themes in ways that classmates who had not read the books could engage with. As responding to texts is a key academic skill in other ELA courses, extra support here could benefit ER students and be transferable to other courses and contexts.

Finally, it is essential that the library has a wide range of titles to accommodate a wide range of learner interests regardless of the term or word count goal. It is important, therefore, that the program continues to invest in suitable reading materials for ER in the university's own library, and/or via a digital platform like Xreading. Allowing both physical and digital copies to be read in the course is another consideration for course coordinators too.

Conclusion

ER is now in its fifth year in the program and, as of Spring AY2022, has made a welcome return to face-to-face course delivery. As students and teachers transition back to classrooms, there is much to reflect on from the experiences and insights of the last few years. ER has become a mainstay of the Stream 4 AS course, and owing to the success of the last four years, it seems likely to remain as such. It is hoped that as the responsibilities of course coordination passes to different members of ELA faculty, the process of evaluation and review will continue so that learning gains for ER course can be maximised and the course itself can evolve into a stronger version of its current self.

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