

## **Review of Website Xreading**

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Xreading (<https://xreading.com>) is an online digital library with over 1,000 graded readers written specifically for English as an additional language (EAL) students. Featuring a Learner Management System (LMS) that allows teachers to monitor their students' reading progress, it is designed to assist in the implementation of extensive reading (ER) programs.

The core principles of ER involve students reading a large number of books at a comfortable difficulty level over sustained periods of time (Day & Bamford, 1998). The benefits of ER for EAL learners have been well researched and include boosting learner autonomy, building vocabulary and grammar and even increasing creative second language use (Clarity, 2007; Safaia & Bulca, 2013). Despite these established benefits, difficulties often arise in using ER for several reasons. For instance, some institutions may have inadequate library resources, thereby limiting students' access to the number of books necessary to make an ER program successful. In addition, motivation among students can be an issue in terms of the difference in their ability to read in their first language and in English (Takase, 2007) as well as accountability: How can we know our students are actually reading all these books (Campbell & Wetherford, 2013)?

Xreading aims to address these and other issues in order to facilitate a successful ER experience by access to graded readers on computers or mobile devices. These books include a range of well-established publishers including Cengage Learning, Macmillan Learners, and Cambridge University Press and many lesser-known ones such as Helbling, ELI, Atama-ii, Compass, and Garnet. The books are divided into 15 difficulty levels based primarily on their number of headwords. The system is accessible globally, although the actual books available vary by country. Subscriptions start at \$5.00 per month; discounts of up to 80% are available for institutions ("about Xreading," n.d.).

### **Advantages of Xreading**

There are several features of Xreading that give it advantages over a regular library of printed graded readers from the perspective of the students, instructors and institutions as elaborated below.

### Features and Benefits for Students

Xreading is simple and intuitive for students and there are printable tutorials available. With such a vast library, selecting an appropriate book can be daunting; therefore, most users start by taking a placement test. The result tells them their reading ability relative to the levels in Xreading and therefore helps them choose books. Once they get to the library, users can browse by level, genre, and other useful criteria as shown in Figure 1.

The screenshot shows the Xreading website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'Home', 'My Books', 'Classes', 'Assignments', and 'Profile'. A search bar is located on the left side. The main content area displays a list of books under the heading 'Full Library'. Three book cards are visible:

- Princess Diana**: MacMillan English Readers (2) by Ann Collins. Xreading Level: 5 (600 headwords). Genre(s): Non-Fiction, Biography. Words: 10192. Rating: 4.1 stars (40 reviews). Summary: A sympathetic and informative description of the life of Britain's famous princess. The fairy-tale marriage of Lady Diana Spencer to Prince Charles was not to last and Diana's life would be cut short by a terrible car crash. Includes photographs and details of Diana's life. Type: Retold Classic. Format: Narrative. English type: British. Audio: Narration (59 min).
- A Helping Hand**: Cengage - Foundations Reading Library(6) by Rob Waring and Maurice Jamall. Xreading Level: 3 (300 headwords). Genre(s): Suspense/Thriller, About Teenagers. Words: 2477. Rating: 4.1 stars (40 reviews). Summary: David and his friends are riding their bikes to the beach when they meet some angry dogs. David goes missing, and Tyler and Daniela go to look for him. What has happened to David? Type: Original. Format: Narrative. English type: American. Audio: Narration (22 min).
- Amy's Song**: MPI-Building Blocks Library(4) by Glenn McDougall. Xreading Level: 2 (170 headwords). Genre(s): Human Interest, Drama, About Teenagers. Words: 344. Rating: 4.1 stars (40 reviews). Summary: Amy loves to sing. She wants to be the singer in the school band, but she's not sure she's good enough. Ben has a plan to help her. Will it work? Type: Original. Format: Narrative. English type: American. Audio: Dramatization (4 min).

**Figure 1.** Library search options. Reprinted from <https://xreading.com>. Copyright 2018 by XLearning Systems. Reprinted with permission.

While reading, students can easily access helpful resources, such as the glossary, and character lists. Additionally, they can alter the font size, line spacing and color of the background and text, which could benefit users with visual impairments. Xreading also allows users to access audio files, narrations and sometimes dramatizations of the books, which might be used for extensive listening, pronunciation practice or simply to provide variety. These audio files can be played at five different speeds without distortion. The reading display is shown below in Figure 2.

The screenshot shows a digital reading interface. At the top, there are navigation options: 'Contents -', a font size control (A with minus and plus signs), a play button, a settings gear, and 'Resources -'. Below this is a progress indicator '115/2345'. The main content area is titled 'Chapter 1' and 'My twelfth birthday'. The text reads: 'Listen. I've got an interesting story. It's about me. Where do I start? OK, I know. My birthday. My twelfth birthday. My mother and father want to talk to me. My mom and dad smile a lot. They're happy people. But they aren't smiling today.' Below the text is an illustration of a man, a woman, and a young girl sitting together in a room with a lamp. Underneath the illustration, there are two lines of dialogue: '“We love you, Helen,” Mom tells me.' and '“Yes,” Dad says. “We love you very much.” “But, Helen... We have to tell you something,”

**Figure 2.** Typical reading display. Reprinted from <https://xreading.com>. Copyright 2018 by XLearning Systems. Reprinted with permission.

Since users do not need to take out books from a physical library, availability is no longer an issue— there is no limit on how many books users have access to. Also, there is no need to “return” the books, hence they have more opportunity to read during vacations as they can read in any place and at any time on their mobile devices.

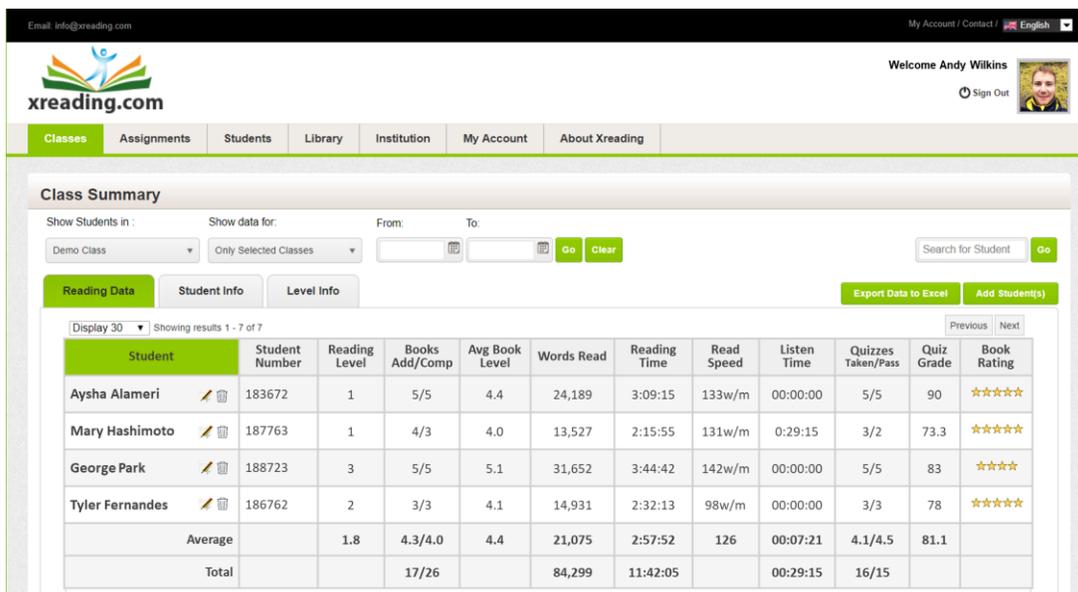
### *Features and Benefits for Instructors*

From an instructor’s perspective, the LMS assists teachers in terms of tracking their students’ reading progress and keeping them accountable. The LMS enables the instructor to add classes and then create assignments for each class. The setting of an assignment could allow students a free or restricted choice of books, as well as a deadline. This means that instructors could choose to have all their students read the same book for a shared class activity such as a group discussion or literature circle (Daniels, 1994).

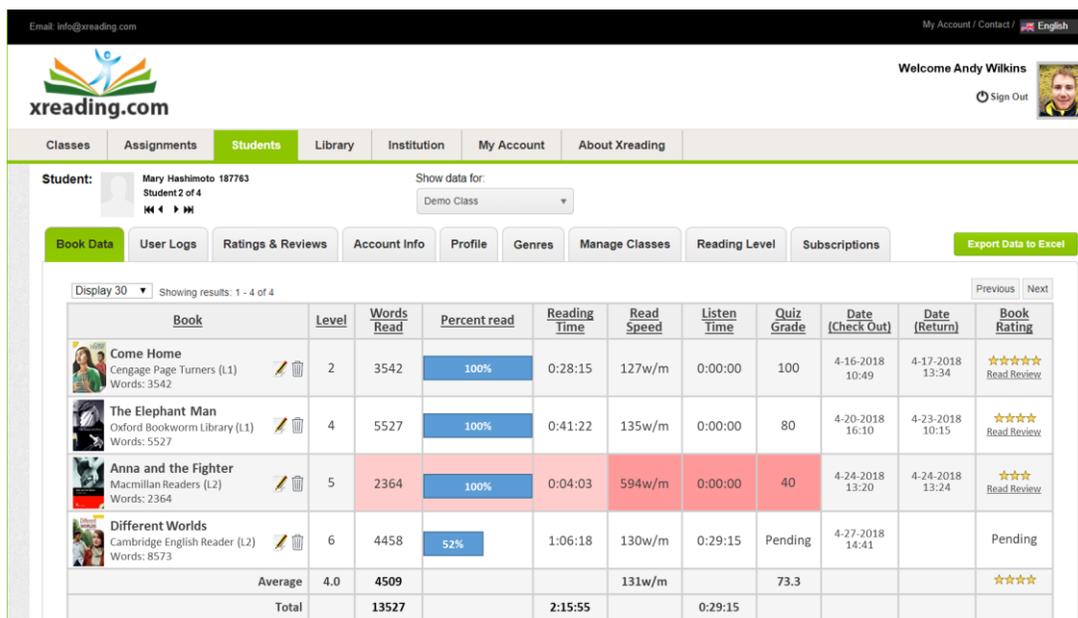
Through the LMS, one of the greatest benefits of using Xreading is that teachers are able to monitor their students’ progress (see Figures 3 and 4). The site tracks the number of books read, the number of words read, the amount of time spent on the site and also reading speed. This data would be very challenging to collect without using an online platform. It would be helpful for instructors assessing large classes in which other forms of assessments such as book reports or presentations may be not possible due to time constraints.

Students can take a short quiz after completion of a book, which may be particularly useful if teachers wish to use Xreading for assessment or want evidence that students have actually read

and understood the main ideas of the book. The quizzes may also motivate the students to finish their books. The monitoring data could benefit ER researchers conducting quantitative studies as it gives detailed information on how much the students have read, their reading speed and the language level chosen.



**Figure 3.** Class assignment data. Reprinted from <https://xreading.com>. Copyright 2018 by XLearning Systems. Reprinted with permission.



**Figure 4.** Individual student data. Reprinted from <https://xreading.com>. Copyright 2018 by XLearning Systems. Reprinted with permission.

### *Features and Benefits for Institutions*

Xreading has a technological advantage over the implementation of ER through a traditional physical library system. The site eliminates the cost of maintaining such a library and saves users' time in terms of checking out books or being disappointed by books that have already been checked out, damaged or lost.

As mentioned above, an unlimited number of users can open any book; in a physical library, it would be unfeasible to have multiple copies of such a wide range of literature. Institutions can also save resources by using Xreading instead of a physical library as it requires neither space nor staff, making it ideal for institutions with budget limitations.

### **Problems and Issues**

The appeal of Xreading may depend on the users' physical comfort level with using screen technology to read on rather than using a printed text. Some people do not enjoy reading for long periods from a screen, reporting issues such as eye strain, while others express a strong preference for the smell and feel of actual books (Baron, 2015). As the enjoyment factor is an integral part of the ER paradigm, this site may not be suitable for everyone. In addition, there has been some suggestions that online reading leads to poorer comprehension (Mangen, Walgermo, & Brønneick, 2013), although this may be less of an issue with extensive reading in which students' focus is on enjoyment.

Previous problems encountered with Xreading have included both limited selection and also instability of the platform (Collett, 2018). However, these issues seem to have been addressed, with twice as many books available as compared to when Collett collected his data between 2015 and 2016. As for instability, this reviewer did not experience any technical problems with the site.

Xreading does provide an option for students who prefer physical books as it has incorporated more than 7,000 quizzes from another online ER platform, M-Reader. In this way, students can borrow books from their institution and then search for the relevant quiz on Xreading, which once taken, will be added to the students' record.

### **Personal Experience**

I have used Xreading for the past three years with beginner and intermediate level international students. Many of my students initially appeared to lack reading confidence in English and some reported that they had never completed a book in English prior to my class. Xreading allowed them to easily and quickly finish a short, graded reader, which may have laid a motivational foundation for further reading. In addition, some students reported feeling sufficiently confident to approach original language literature versus a graded reader following their experience with Xreading.

It was important to explain to the students the concept of ER before using the site so that my

students could realize the benefits of using it. Furthermore, an introductory tutorial in a language lab seemed necessary to ensure the students understood that this resource was more than just simply reading from a screen rather than a book. As with most teaching tools, the teacher's enthusiasm was essential in terms of persuading students to invest their time. This was done by eliciting students' preference of genre and then recommending matching books that had been enjoyed in previous classes.

Though it is relatively easy to set up an account and use the site, it was essential to provide oral feedback and guidance for students to navigate the site comfortably, check some of their reading statistics and have a chance to ask questions. Despite the tutorials that exist on the site, students who missed my workshop often encountered problems trying to understand the site independently, which consequently marred their experience. A video tutorial might be more effective at addressing this issue, particularly if instructors can check if their students have watched it.

In terms of student motivation for *Xreading*, not surprisingly, it seemed students who appeared motivated to read in general used the site more frequently as compared to students who expressed less enthusiasm. By showing my students selected data from the monitoring tools, it was possible to create friendly competition among students to read more than their peers. These weekly demonstrations of interest may have improved students' motivation as well encouraging them to read regularly as opposed to just before their final assessment.

Occasionally students reported discomfort from reading from a screen; however, the majority of students seemed more used to reading from a screen than a page. This anecdotal evidence correlates with research conducted in Japanese universities that found a preference among those students for reading from screens for TOEIC materials (Shimada, 2017) and among males with lower English levels (Walker, 2016).

## **Applications**

Though my teaching context is with adult international students in Canada, *Xreading* would seem to be appropriate for elementary and high school aged students, although the number of suitable books would be more limited for younger students. It could also be used in EAP courses to accompany intensive reading. In addition, *Xreading* might appeal to institutions in developing countries, which may have larger, multi-level classes as students within the same class can read materials at different difficulty levels. Moreover, financially, *Xreading* could be attractive because some institutions may not be able to maintain a physical lending library. Finally, it could be an appropriate tool for students studying in distance education or in rural areas, again with limited access to physical libraries.

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### **About the Reviewer**

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