

Review of L2 Reading Websites

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This is an annotated bibliography of some useful second language (L2) reading websites. The reviewer’s focus in this review was to describe and critically evaluate websites that facilitate and support the idea of Extensive Reading (ER). ER has proven to be effective, motivating, and enjoyable; nonetheless, many programs opt to exclude it from the general curricula due to its probable contradiction with the traditional views of teaching reading (Day & Bamford, 1998), and it does not properly prepare students for achievement tests. These are certainly two major reasons behind why ER programs in English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts do not exist. Thus, in the process of persuading reading instructors to integrate ER into their language curriculum, it is always ideal to start small, as recommended by Day and Bamford (1998). Instructors at the preliminary stages of adopting an ER approach would need materials that are accessible, level appropriate, and most importantly “free.” This review is intended for L2 practitioners by accumulating a number of useful L2 reading websites that would give them free access to a huge selection of readings that they can share with their students. It also serves as a guide that they can refer to or share with other reading teachers who are interested in ER. It is hoped that after teachers try out these websites and notice students’ increased reaction and engagement in the classroom, school administrations would be convinced to move from small to big and establish a physical reading library, as well as acknowledge the benefits of ER and make it part of the language learning curriculum.

ER-Central (<https://www.er-central.com/>)

This is an online source that was designed for ESL/EFL learners. ER-Central promotes ER by offering a wide variety of suitable L2 reading and listening texts in 20 different language levels. The website has four major features: Read, Listen, Learn Words, and Text Helper. The “Read” feature offers more than 1,000 different texts that are modified to fit 20 proficiency levels. Those reading texts are broken down into four main reading genres. The first is “Factual” which consists of 19 subgenres that present readers with texts in art, sports, culture, and the like. The second main genre is “Story,” which includes stories in 10 subgenres, such as adventure, comedy, horror, and drama. The third category is dedicated to “Children’s Stories,” and it includes readings on various topics. The last category is titled “Student Writing,” and it involves fiction and non-fiction stories that are written by students. Once you click on the “Read” icon in the front face of the website, it takes you to a “library.” This library is a search engine that enables the website users to search for texts by title and by level. Users can also choose one of the aforementioned four main reading genres directly from the library. Once you click on a

particular text or topic, a pop-up window shows, and it displays information about the difficulty level (assigned in numbers from 1–20), the number of words in that text, a five-star rating of the text, the genre and subgenre of the text, and a brief description in the form of a “blurb.” After clicking on the “read it” icon from that pop-out window, another window shows, which contains the reading text that is also preceded by a reading timer. The second feature, “Listen,” also contains more than 1000 different texts in various genres. This is different from the “Read” feature in that the reading text is associated with an audio file to enable readers to read and listen at the same time. In both features, only signed-up users can select a word and save it in a wordlist that they can refer to at any time. These words get saved in the “Learn Words” feature where learners can practice using them in several word learning games. Teachers can also use the “Text Helper” function to enter a text and choose a desired level, out of the 20 levels, and the website will try to highlight all the out-of-level words in red, along with their definitions.

This is a useful online source for teachers who want their students to read extensively, but do not have access to graded readers that are compatible with various proficiency levels. What is also great about this website is that it is free of charge for teachers and students. After they sign up, they get to create their own platform that consists of wordlists and bookmarks for readers to keep track of their progress. The website is also available in 10 different languages, which is excellent for reading teachers of other languages. Another great feature is the text helper, as it enables teachers to modify any text, so it suits the learners’ current language level. Navigating the website was not challenging, and the reviewer does not think it needs any guidance or additional instruction. When creating a teacher account, a teacher can upload their own student list and create exams—a recordkeeping feature that could work as an alternative digital log. The timed reading feature is also helpful as research showed it has a positive influence on students’ comprehension and reading speed (Chang, 2010). That said, it would have been great if the founder of the website mentioned more information about the 20 language levels that are assigned to each text, such as how these levels pertain to the Common European Framework (CEFR) guidelines. Teachers might struggle with knowing how those levels could help in determining the appropriate reading for their students. Also, the reading texts on the website lack visual aids. The presence of visual aids in reading texts has been shown to have a positive effect on students’ reading comprehension (Hou, 2006; Huang, 2019; Omaggio, 1979). Another major weakness is that the reading texts, even at the highest proficiency level, are relatively short, which can be less interesting for skilled readers. The presence of a reading timer is not consistent across all texts, as some of them lack this feature. Also, the website mentions that quizzes and comprehension checks are available to readers after each text, yet the reviewer sees no sign of these quizzes on the website.

The Learning Network (<https://www.nytimes.com/section/learning>)

The Learning Network is a web platform dedicated to offering students and teachers access to multiple learning resources based on the most recently published news articles. As stated by its creators, the website is intended for students and teachers at middle and high schools, and it could also be used by college students. The main audience of this website is students in the United States, and there was no mention if the content is specifically designed for ESL or EFL learners or for teachers. More than 1000 resources for teachers and students, including articles, lesson plans, and quizzes, are published annually and offered to the website users at no cost. In

relation to reading, the front face of the website mentions a main feature called “Activities for Students.” In this feature, you find categories, such as lesson of the day and quizzes (Word of the Day). Once you click on the “lesson of the day” icon, the website takes you to a page called “Articles & Questions.” There, you can see several reading articles with diverse content, such as politics, culture, and sports. There is also a search bar where you can insert a keyword and find a more relevant news article to your students’ interests. An example of one lesson is an article called, *Your Loved Ones, and Eerie Tom Cruise Videos, Reanimate Unease With Deepfakes*, which is intended to teach students about deepfake technology and how it can be deceptive. Under the title of that article, several learning outcomes were mentioned, accompanied by a picture depicting the concept of deepfake technology. Following that came a “lesson overview” where the main article, provided in a link that students could access and read, was summarized and broken down into key points. The last section of the lesson integrated multimedia where students could see videos of this technology and were asked some critical thinking questions. Another feature in “Activities for Students” is quizzes, where students can interact with an activity called “Word of the Day.” They get introduced to a word that was frequently mentioned in several New York Times articles and get to see its definition and usage in a different article. Then, they get a one-question quiz where they are asked to use that word in a sentence.

While the previous reading website (ER-Central) could be more appealing for beginners, this website is an excellent ER source for more advanced learners. The topics are diverse and might be intriguing for those skilled learners as they reflect what is currently happening in the world. Aside from just focusing on the “Learning Network” section of the website, the home page of The New York Times classifies articles into several genres, such as, sports, foods, and entertainment. One of the 10 principles of teaching ER suggested by Day and Bamford (2002) and similar to Williams’s (1986) ideas is to offer readings of personal interest to the students. The diversity of topics in this website would definitely achieve this goal. Also, the lesson plans feature is great as it enables students to engage with the reading and share those critical thinking questions with the teacher or other classmates. That said, as mentioned above, the content of this website is set for high-level learners, and even for those skilled learners, the language on this website can be quite challenging. Thus, teachers are recommended to preview the website first and then offer students some advice on choosing what is appropriate to their level, without restricting them to certain articles or topics as it goes against the sole purpose of ER. Another downside is that the website can be challenging to navigate, as it is not entirely devoted to language learners. Teachers are urged to provide instruction on how to access reading texts easily.

Project Gutenberg (<http://gutenberg.org/ebooks/>)

Project Gutenberg is an online library of more than 64,000 free electronic books (eBooks). Michael Hart, the founder of the website, had a mission stating that all people with computers should have free access to read and distribute eBooks. On the front page of the website, there is a “Search and Browse” tab, where website users can have access to “Book Search,” “Bookshelves,” “Frequently Downloaded books,” and “Offline Catalogs.” First, in “Book Search,” you can look for the most popular books, the latest releases, and all other books. There is also a search bar where you can enter the name of a specific book or the author’s name to check for availability. Second, “Bookshelves” enables website users to search for books under

the same genre. For example, there are more than 18 different categories that are arranged alphabetically under names, such as “Short Stories,” “Politics,” and “Religion.” Once you click on a particular category, let us say *humor*, a collection of books under that specific category, such as “The Devil’s Dictionary” and “The Diary of Nobody” appears on the screen along with the number of downloads and the authors’ names. After selecting a book, another page pops out with downloading options and bibliographic information of the book, including date of publication, language, and genre. Third, the “Frequently Downloaded” tab gives you information about the top 100 downloaded books and top 100 searched for authors in the last 30 days. Finally, the “Offline Catalog” simply tells you how to find and get eBooks if you have a weak internet connection or would like to read a book offline.

This is another website that teachers with limited resources, such as not having a physical library, can utilize in support of their ER program. More than 64,000 books with various topics are available to read and download for free. Also, the website is user-friendly, and it does not require login information or detailed usage instruction. Nonetheless, alongside the New York Times, this website is primarily intended for native English (L1) speakers. Only advanced L2 learners might benefit from it. However, teachers can modify the text according to the learner’s level by entering that text into the “Text Helper” function that was mentioned above in the review of ER-Central and substitute some of the difficult words for easier ones. One major weakness is that a text can be extremely lengthy which might lead some students to avoid reading it once they see how extensive it looks on the website. Teachers are prompted to divide long texts into chapters and print it out for students so they can read it throughout an entire semester for example.

English Listening Lesson Library Online (<https://ello.org/index.htm>)

English Listening Lesson Library Online (ELLLO) is a website that offers more than 3000 scripted listening activities that are free of charge and dedicated to L2 learners. All these scripts are categorized based on the six CEFR language levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2). The front page of the website has a quick lesson guide that includes five main features of the website. The first feature is called “Views,” where students can learn English with lessons featuring audio (and/or video), a script, an interactive comprehension quiz, and vocabulary activities. There are more than 1,500 various topics, and when you click on a particular topic, another page appears with the level of the reading script at the top left corner, the number of views, the topic of the reading, the video or the audio, and the whole script followed by a vocabulary activity and a comprehension quiz. The second feature is called “One Minute English,” and it is about watching short videos featuring speakers from different parts of the world. Videos come with a script and a quiz, and there are nearly 1,500 short videos about everyday life topics such as, *Do you prefer shopping in a mall or online?* and *Do you like taking selfies?* The third feature is called “Mixer,” and it offers listening lessons where six people share their thoughts about the same topic. There are 150 lessons included in this feature that come with videos, audio, scripts, quizzes, and vocabulary activities. The fourth feature is ‘News Center’, and it offers 20 news stories on different topics like *Recycling*, *College Students*, and *Train Crash*. Similar to the last three features, this one also has videos, scripts, and quizzes. The last feature is called “Standardized Exam Practice,” and it presents students with 20 topics that are designed to give students practice with reading and listening tests on the Test of English as a Foreign Language

(TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Every reading text in this website is graded according to CEFR guidelines.

Although originally this was a listening website, the script that follows each audio or video is good for reading practice. It can also be fun when students see a video, and then read the script following it. Research has shown that integrating reading and listening can aid in comprehension (Taguchi et al., 2016), and this website is well-equipped to do so. In addition, even though the website offers more than 3000 different texts, there is a search bar where students can enter some keywords and read about their favorite topics. Also, one excellent feature on this website is that all materials are graded according to CEFR, which is great for teachers who want to introduce reading materials that are level appropriate without paying a single penny. The website is easy to navigate, and the multimedia is fun to watch. Quizzes are also a bonus for teachers who want to check their students' reading comprehension. One caveat with this website is that many lessons are based on short conversations that display formulaic language use, which can be boring, inauthentic, and against the idea behind ER. Other than that, this website can be a free library for those teachers who are looking for graded materials in their ER programs.

Free Graded Readers (<https://freegradedreaders.com/wordpress/>)

Free Graded Readers is a website that presents L2 learners with interesting free books that fit their level of reading. This website uses CEFR guidelines (Beginner, A1–Advanced, C2) to decide the level of reading for each book. On the front page of the website, there is an instruction page where the website designers urge readers to use the “5-finger rule” to determine which reading is suitable for their English level. This rule dictates that, in any selected book, readers should first open any page and look for unfamiliar words. Then they count them to see if there are less than five unknown words in one page. If there are more than five words, then it is recommended to search for another easier book. At the top of the front page, there is a tab that includes the CEFR levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2. At the A1 (Beginning) level, there are two graded books titled *Fire on the Mountain* and *Indonesian Love Story*. Before one can click on any of these stories and start to read them, information about the book (in the form of a blurb), name of the author(s), a picture of the front page, reading level, and word level are provided on the page. Once a reader chooses a particular book, another page pops out with a scanned black and white version of the original book. Readers can download it in a portable document format (PDF) and save it to their personal computers for free, but they are not permitted to offer any book for sale. A1 Level readings start at the 500–1000 word level and can increase in the following levels: A2 (1500 word level), B1–B2 (2000 word level), and C1–C2 (6000–8000 word levels). All books are supplemented with visuals, except for books at the C2 level. Also, there are quizzes for books labeled in a red capital M, but students would have to access MReader.org, which only allows access to students with unique ID numbers.

This is another great website, which offers a fine selection of graded readers. Teachers would not have to worry about the appropriate level of each book as the website labels each reading according to CEFR levels. Also, the 5-finger rule is extremely helpful for students who might be below or above their designated proficiency level, but want to read something that fits their level. Materials are free and can be downloaded for no extra charge, and students can print them out, and maybe take notes or share them with other classmates. The shortened and modified versions

of famous fictional and non-fictional works at the 4000, 6000, and 8000 word-level would enable readers to feel comfortable when reading a sophisticated piece of writing as many words were modified to fit their proficiency level. The only drawback that the reviewer sees in this website is that there is a limited selection of only 20 graded readers in the entire website. Aside from that, this website is an excellent resource for teachers in ER programs that they can add to their collection of free reading materials.

Learn English Teens (<https://learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org/study-break/graded-reading>)

Learn English Teens is one of many series created by the British Council to help language learners with their reading, listening, speaking, and writing skills. The focus here is on the “Graded Reading” feature in this website, which offers learners some interesting short stories. On the main page you click on “Study Break” at the top bar, and you click on “Graded Reading” to access 24 short stories that are written at three CEFR levels (Elementary A2 graded reading, Intermediate B1 graded reading, and Upper Intermediate B2 graded reading). The topics of these stories are quite general, such as *Animals in the City* and *Love is Blind*. On the “Graded Reading” website page, you can see the three levels on the top bar. When clicking on each level, you see the same topic and the same story, but in a different level. For example, these two short paragraphs are from a story called, “A Walk in the Forest.” This first paragraph is from the story at the elementary level: “It’s cold today, so Benji and I are walking fast. As we go through the forest, it starts raining so I run. Suddenly, I fall and I’m on my back. OUCH! That hurt!”. The following is in the same paragraph, but at the intermediate level, “I’m out with Benji again. It’s cold and rainy today, so we’re going fast. As I’m coming through the forest, it starts raining hard, so I run. Suddenly, I’m slipping and falling and, before I know it, I’m lying on my back. Ouch! That hurt.” When selecting a particular story, the website takes you to a new tab that contains a picture related to the topic followed by the story. Once you finish reading the story, there is a reading comprehension quiz in the form of true and false questions or multiple-choice questions, and a grammar quiz. At the bottom of the page, there is a comment section where readers can leave a comment about the story.

This is another graded reader website which, compared to Free Graded Readers, offers much shorter stories. The special thing about this website is that it has the same reading, but at three different levels. This could be interesting for students who want to monitor their progress across multiple proficiency levels. Reading texts at different difficulty levels can improve reading comprehension, as shown in Bahmani and Farvardin (2017). It is also a great vocabulary exercise as students can learn many new words. In addition, leaving a comment under each story helps in building a personal connection with the story and with other readers who share the same interest, which could be a great technique to ensure that students persist in reading with interest. One limitation of this website is that many stories feel scripted and might be too short for students. Also, there are no visual aids associated with the text. Besides that, this website should be on each ER teacher’s list of free reading sources.

TTribune (<https://www.tweentribune.com>)

TTribune is a free online library created by the Smithsonian Institute for use by K-12 grade teachers and students. The website was not originally designed for L2 learners, as it is intended for students in the American education system. TTribune consists of daily news articles about current events, history, art, culture, and science and are taken from the Associated Press, local newspapers, and TV stations. This website presents readers with articles in different genres such as education, art, sports, technology, world news, and plenty more, totaling almost 1,310 different news articles. Each article is tailored for different reading levels (e.g., GRADE K-4, GRADE 5-6, GRADE 7-8, GRADE 9-12) and different Lexile levels (ranging from 500L to 1600L). The proficiency guidelines used in this website are quite unfamiliar to many teachers, especially outside the U.S.; however, the reviewer recommends checking this link by University of Colorado Boulder (<https://www.colorado.edu/flatironsforum/2018/05/14/reading-metrics-explanations-and-justifications>). It shows an approximate comparison between CEFR Levels and Intensive Reading Lexile Levels that can help teachers assign an equivalent level for students. Similar to Learn English Teens, each article is assigned four different Lexile levels, starting from the easiest to the hardest. For example, one article called *Happy Leap Day* is offered at the GRADE K-4/470L, GRADE 5-6/720L, GRADE 7-8/890L, and GRADE 9-12/1150L levels. Once a reader clicks on a certain article, a page pops up with a representative picture of the topic, followed by a Lexile level, a scripted text, a video with a person narrating the same text with some visuals, and finally, a comment section where readers can answer a critical question posed at the end of the article or even leave a review. Articles can be searched for by name, genre, Lexile level, and grade level at the main website page. In order to leave a comment or take a quiz, students must create an account using a code sent to their teachers.

This is another website that readers can use to check their vocabulary progress through different levels of the same article. Compared to Learn English Teens, which adopts a similar idea, this website is definitely an upgrade as it contains a bigger selection of readings in multiple genres. One of the downsides of this website is that not all articles have a supplementary video illustration. Another caveat is that students cannot register for an account by themselves, and thus cannot leave a comment or take a quiz unless a teacher gets a code from the website developers.

Conclusion

The focus of this review was to describe and evaluate, in the form of an annotated bibliography, a small number of “free” reading websites, although there are more non-free websites such as Xreading (<https://xreading.com/>; check Wilkins, 2019 for a full review), Raz-Kids (<https://www.raz-kids.com/>), and ReadOasis (<https://readoasis.com/>). However, this review was intended to be a guiding manual and a reference for L2 instructors who are interested in the concept of ER and want to start small by trying out free websites as a starter. Even though a number of these websites are not directly intended for L2 language learners, instructors can evaluate each website and select the resources that accommodate the needs of their language learners. The reviewer also prompts teachers to read the relevant literature that outlines the influence of ER on different aspects of L2 reading. Although this short review has cited few relevant studies, there is still an abundance of literature concerning ER. As a starter, the reviewer

directs readers to read the work of Day and Bamford (1998) and Grabe (2009) to establish a solid foundation of understanding ER. Readers are also encouraged to read meta-analysis studies of ER-related research (Jeon & Day, 2016; Kim, 2012; Krashen, 2007; Nakanishi, 2015; Wang & Kim, 2021).

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