Interactive ER: Using Online Discussion to Stimulate Interest and Assess Learners' Engagement in Extensive Reading

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Online discussion forums can stimulate students' interest in extensive reading and provide opportunities for authentic communication in English. Moreover, they provide a useful tool for teachers to use in accessing and assessing learners' engagement and participation in extensive reading. This article outlines a basic format for using online discussion forums via Moodle as a medium for students to share information about extensive reading books, and compares online discussion with other tasks commonly used to assess learners' participation in extensive reading. Discussion prompts and samples of students' work are included in appendices.

Benefits of extensive reading

Over the past three decades, benefits of extensive reading, including gains in reading proficiency, writing proficiency, oral skills, listening proficiency, vocabulary acquisition, general linguistic competence and a growth in positive affect, have been well documented. David Hill (2007), director of the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading, established in 1981 by the Institute of Applied Linguistic Studies at the University of Edinburgh, states that benefits attributable to extensive reading include increased motivation, reading proficiency, and writing proficiency, with the cumulative effect of improving general L2 proficiency as a long-term benefit. Likewise, Eskey and Grabe (1988) suggest, "Both top-down and

bottom-up skills can, in the long run, only be developed by extensive reading over time" (228). Furthermore, they assert, "Major increases in reading rate can only follow... from extensive reading in the language over time" (235). Grabe (1991) notes that some of the benefits of extensive reading are to "build up vocabulary and structural awareness, develop automaticity, enhance background knowledge, improve comprehension skills, and promote confidence and motivation" (396). In their discussion of benefits attributable to extensive reading, Day and Bamford (1998) refer to gains in reading proficiency, writing proficiency, vocabulary acquisition, oral proficiency, listening proficiency, and positive affect (Elley & Mangubhai, 1981; Janopoulos, 1986; Hafiz & Tudor, 1989; Tudor & Hafiz, 1989; Pitts et al., 1989; Robb & Susser, 1989; Hafiz & Tudor, 1990; Elley, 1991; Lai, 1993; Cho & Krashen, 1994; Rodrigo, 1995; Mason & Krashen, 1997) (34). Citing many of the same studies, Nation (1997) also notes gains in reading comprehension, writing proficiency, oral proficiency, listening comprehension, an improved attitude toward reading, along with gains in word recognition and in TOEFL test performance. Moreover, Alastair Graham-Marr (2007) asserts that extensive reading can contribute to improved TOEIC test performance.

In their review of L2 extensive reading research, Day and Bamford (1998) make particular reference to gains in affect noting, "Study after study shows how attitudes changed toward reading in the second language and how the students became eager readers" (35). Day and Bamford (1998) describe this gain in affect in the following way, which they refer to as the *extensive reading bookstrap hypothesis*.

Students' initial successful experiences in extensive reading result in the discovery that they can read in the second language and that it is rewarding and pleasurable. This stimulates the development of positive attitudes toward reading in the second language and the

growth of motivation to read in the second language. These positive beginning experiences then feed back into subsequent extensive reading experiences and assignments, resulting in greater gains in reading ability and positive attitudes, and increases in motivation and enjoyment (30).

However, Nation (1997) cites a lack of control in the research design of certain studies, and Coady (1997) and Horst, Cobb, and Maera (1998) also point to methodological problems in L2 extensive reading research. In his critique of 28 papers involving L2 extensive reading research over a 20-year period, Waring (2001) outlines various factors which call into question reported benefits attributed to extensive reading. These factors include a lack of quality control in test construction and issues involving test format, sample size, contamination, insufficient reporting, etc. Nevertheless, he asserts, "The positive effect of ER on motivation and attitude to reading is very commonly reported and probably the strongest finding in all the papers reviewed here (e.g. Constantino, 1994; Evans, 1999; Elley, 1991; Mason and Krashen, 1997; Hayashi, 1999, Yamazaki, 1996)" (6).

In describing one component of his L2 Motivational Self System, the ideal L2 self, Dörnyei (2009) states, "if the person we would like to become speaks an L2, the ideal L2 self is a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because of the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves" (217). Referencing Higgins' (1987; Higgins, Klein, and Strauman, 1985) theory involving the motivational capacity of future self-guides, Dörnyei explains, "Future self-guides provide incentive, direction, and impetus for action, and sufficient discrepancy between these and the actual self initiates distinctive self-regulatory strategies with the aim of reducing the discrepancy" (215). In citing Ruvolo and Markus (1992: 96), Dörnyei further specifies, "possible selves are only effective insomuch as the

individual does indeed perceive them as *possible*, that is, realistic within the person's individual circumstances" (216). Thus, in the process described by Day and Bamford as the *extensive reading bookstrap hypothesis,* a more specific representation of an 'ideal L2 self' (i.e. one that can read in L2) evolves, which in turn, serves to increase a learner's motivation to read in L2 in order to reduce the discrepancy between actual and ideal selves.

Extensive reading tasks

In actuality, however, many students are not motivated to read in L2, and some commonly-used extensive reading tasks fail to stimulate learners' interest or engage their participation. Typically, these include written book reports, submitted to the teacher, and oral book reports or summaries, presented in small groups or to the whole class. While these are among the most commonly-used forms of assessment, teachers often voice similar concerns regarding their inherent disadvantages. Writing a book report to submit to a teacher is an isolated task, written for a limited audience. Such reports tend to limit learners' exposure to information about other books. Another disadvantage of both written and oral reports is the tendency for some students to copy information from another source, "*kopipe,*" as it is called in Japanese. Both written and oral book reports are done when a student has finished reading a book. If there is a deadline for submitting the reports, some students will inevitably end up racing to finish their books and make a report. However, such pressure seems antithetical to the notion of pleasure reading.

Oral book reports or summaries, whether presented to the whole class or in small groups, involve other drawbacks. When students read or present oral reports individually to the whole class, some students may lose interest after the first, fourth, or fourteenth report, and may begin to chat with friends or check text messages. Other students may be unable to understand some of the language used in

reports, but may hesitate to ask for clarification, especially in a whole group setting. Thus, students in the audience may opt to play a passive role and may refrain from asking questions, despite having only limited understanding of their classmates' summaries or knowledge about their books. While learners may be more willing to speak in a small group, they may have difficulty asking or answering questions in real time. There is also a much greater tendency for students to speak Japanese when working in small groups, and even in this format, some students may still opt to play a passive role. Doing oral reports in small groups presents an additional challenge for teachers, in terms of providing fair and comprehensive assessment, based on observing only partial presentations.

Online discussion forums

Description of the process

Using the online discussion forum via Moodle as an interactive tool for students to share information about the books that they are reading can circumvent some of the factors limiting the effectiveness of the above-mentioned extensive reading tasks. The process is relatively simple, both for teachers to set up and for learners to grasp. Meeting in a computer lab every other week, students respond online to several prompts or questions about their books (Appendix 1). Working in teams of four, students' responses are visible to each of their teammates, who subsequently read and reply to each of these postings, making comments or asking questions about what their teammates have written. Each student posts a minimum of four times for each prompt: first, their response to the prompt, and then a reply to each of their teammates' postings. Students' initial postings in response to each of the prompts should be longer than 50 words. Their replies to their teammates' postings can vary in length and frequency.

The initial prompt, "Why did you choose the book," can be answered easily by all students, regardless of how much or how little of their book they have read at that point. The simple instructions for posting to the online discussion forum (shown below) are also included in the first prompt.

1) Click "Add a new discussion topic" and write a response to this question that is longer than 50 words. Include the title and author's name as the 'Subject.' Then click "Post to forum."

2) Read and reply to your group mates' postings, and answer their questions about your book. (These replies can be shorter than 50 words.)

In addition, the sample entry shown below is given in the first prompt to demonstrate that it is unnecessary to write a lengthy response, or to have read the book before responding to the prompt.

Subject: *The DaVinci Code,* by Dan Brown

Message: I chose this book because several friends recommended it and thought I'd really like it. I enjoy reading mysteries, and I'm also interested in DaVinci's paintings. While I was living in France, I taught in the town of Amboise, where DaVinci lived. His house is now a museum and there are models of many of his inventions on display there. (59 words)

With these simple instructions and model response, students' success in their initial foray into online discussion forums is virtually assured. By the end of the first session, students are interacting with their teammates, and are well on their way to completing subsequent tasks with minimal assistance.

In addition to discussing books with their team members, students post new vocabulary from their books to an online class glossary

(Appendix 2). All students are responsible for posting a new vocabulary term, along with an English definition, the part of speech, and the original sentence, during each Moodle session.

Students can also opt to share information about the books that they are reading by posting recommendations (Appendices 1 and 7) . Some of the books that have been highly recommended by students include: *Three Great Plays of Shakespeare, Stories of Courage, Strangers on a Train, Oliver Twist, Charley and the Chocolate Factory, Back to the Future, About a Boy, Emma, and The Phantom of the Opera,* which are indicative of the various genres that appeal to different learners. Both the online glossary and students' recommendations are accessible to all students in the class.

Students read at least two books per semester, and online discussion group members change mid-semester. Working with the same group members for half a semester promotes team-building and fosters collaboration among students, who generally find it easy to participate, due, in part, to a conducive audience.

Benefits of using online discussion

Online discussions provide an opportunity for authentic communication among team members about the stories that they are reading, and students tend to stay in English. They are more apt to ask for clarification or confirmation and to ask follow up questions for additional information and details about their teammates' books. Another advantage of online discussions is that each individual can work at his or her own pace, for example, taking time to check new vocabulary as needed. Students can work either in class or outside of class, and their participation is self-directed, which fosters autonomous learning.

Sample student entries

Excerpts from sample student entries are included in Appendices 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. (Grammatical and typographical errors have not been corrected.) In an excerpt from a discussion string about the first prompt, "Why did you choose the book," a student mentioned that she had never read Shakespeare because she had been told that his works were too difficult to read and understand (Appendix 3). She indicated that she was enjoying reading *Romeo and Juliet, King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. One of her teammates replied, "Your book seems so interesting!!! I wanted to read Shakespeare but it seems so hard.... I want to read that book too!!!" Both of these students' comments suggest increased motivation to read in L2.

Another student who was reading *Far from the Madding Crowd* commented that the "book is very interesting, and if you once start to read this book, you can never stop to read. I thought I recommend this book everyone." In her response to the second prompt, "Describe the setting of the story and any characters that have appeared so far and his/her relationship with other characters," she describes Bathsheba Everdene's relationships with two of her three male suitors; however, she does not mention when or where the story takes place (Appendix 4).

One of her teammates responds by asking, "Where is this story located," and then asks two follow up questions to find out more information about the story. This kind of peer feedback, requesting clarification and further details, is instructive for the storyteller, who subsequently provides the missing information. Asking follow up questions to learn more about the plot and characters is a natural part of storytelling, and such examples of authentic communication occur spontaneously within the framework of this interactive task.

A student reading *Strangers on a Train* responds to the third prompt, "Describe the main character of the story and his/her relationship with other characters," in the following manner.

The main characters of this book are Guy Haines and Charley
Bruno. They are strangers. They met on a train first. Guy has wife
but they are separated. Charley hates his father because he wants
Charley to go into his business and never gives Charley money.
Charley tempts Guy to murder!! (Appendix 5)

This is a fairly concise description of the main characters and plot of
a murder mystery that was adapted by Alfred Hitchcock in his film of
the same title. What follows in the discussion string are 18 exchanges
in relatively rapid succession among team members, unraveling the
details of the story and the twists and turns of the plot. These
repeated exchanges provide another example of authentic
communication and are an indication of students' engagement in the
task, given that the majority of their participation (i.e. 14 of the
responses) was optional. Moreover, the use of peer feedback to clarify
and confirm understanding provides practice in developing useful
language learning skills, and the spontaneous nature of teammates'
requests for further details of the plot precludes the use of *kopipe*.

As noted previously, writing a recommendation about a book is an
optional task. If a student opts to post a recommendation, it is
unnecessary for his or her teammates to reply to the posting. In a
recommendation about *Memoirs of a Geisha,* however, one student
notes that it was interesting for her to read about this Japanese story
in English, and when she mentions the film, "Sayuri," which is the
Japanese title of a film based on the story, all three of her teammates
respond to the posting (Appendix 7). They indicate that they are
interested in seeing the film, and one suggests that they all watch it
together. This exchange illustrates how online discussion can
facilitate collaboration amd foster team-building and a positive group
dynamic.

Teacher access and assessment

The use of online discussion forums affords various benefits to teachers, in terms of accessing students' work easily and providing fair assessment. Online discussions provide a record of everything that students write about the books that they are reading. Thus, teachers are able to base their assessments on the complete compilation of a particular students' work, rather than on partial observation of small group presentations or group discussions in class. Moreover, as mentioned previously, online discussions tend to foster and facilitate authentic communication. Consequently, it is relatively simple to distinguish between a students' original work and the appropriation of some other text or resource, which serves to discourage the use of *kopipe*.

The records of students' postings are accessible from any computer, and teachers can access students' work and provide feedback in a variety of ways. It is possible to view each discussion string in its entirety, with the initial posting (i.e. response to a particular prompt) at the head, and responses to and from all teammates nested below, in the order of their posting. It is also possible to access an individual's postings, either in a streamlined format or a detailed format, with a complete listing of all of his or her posts in chronological order. In addition, an activity log for each course lists the date, time, and type of each entry, along with individual students' names, and the length of each work session. It is possible for teachers to edit, delete, and rate individual postings, using one of several rating scales. Teachers can provide feedback to students by commenting on or replying to individual postings, and both teachers and students can also send messages via email within Moodle, without the need to access a separate email account.

Conclusion

Using online discussion facilitates spontaneous interaction among students about the books that they are reading, which serves to increase learners' motivation to read in L2. In addition to alleviating some of the disadvantages inherent in commonly-used extensive reading tasks, using online discussion promotes collaboration and team-building among students, while also fostering learner autonomy. Moreover, online discussions provide opportunities for authentic communication with a conducive audience, which facilitates participation, and learners tend to stay in English. Online discussion is an interactive task, in which students' efforts are both peer-directed and self-directed. Learners seem more apt to ask questions in order to clarify or confirm their understanding, and to ask follow up questions to discover details about the stories that their teammates are reading. Because it is an ongoing activity, students can work at their own pace, both in class and outside of class.

Students' success in reading in L2 and in participating in discussions with teammates tends to have a positive effect on affect and attitudes toward reading, which, in turn, serves to increase motivation to read in L2. Moreover, detailed information gained through the discussions along with the exposure to a wide selection of books through students' recommendations, facilitate continued reading in L2. Finally, for teachers, the use of online discussion forums provides easy and convenient access to a complete record of students' work, which facilitates fair and comprehensive feedback and assessment.

Appendices
Appendix 1: **Online Discussion Prompts**
Prompt 1: Why did you choose the book?

Prompt 2: Describe the setting of the story (country, town, school, etc) and any characters that have appeared so far. What are your impressions of the characters and/or setting?

Prompt 3: Describe the main character of the story (appearance, age, personality) and his/her relationship with other characters. Then summarize the plot of the story so far.

Prompt 4: Quote your favorite line in the book and explain its meaning. Describe the context in which the line occurs and tell why it is significant to you. OR
Quote an important line in the book and explain its meaning. Describe the context in which the line occurs and tell why it is significant to the story.

Prompt 5: Would you recommend a book you've read to other classmates? If so, tell what you liked about the book and why you enjoyed reading it. Conversely, if you wouldn't recommend a particular book, tell why not.

Appendix 2: **Online Glossary Prompt**
Prompt: Choose a word from the book that you are reading each week to add to our class glossary. Include the part of speech (i.e. noun, verb, adjective), a definition from an English/English dictionary, and the original sentence from your book. Be sure to choose a word that you think will be interesting and relevant to your classmates. After each entry, include the title of the book and page number in parentheses. You may also choose to add a sample sentence of your own.

Sample entry:

- *faith:* (noun): a strong feeling of trust or confidence in someone
  or something

- Original sentence: "That is the definition of 'faith'-acceptance of
  that which we imagine to be true, that which we cannot prove."
  (*The DaVinci Code*, p. 341)

- Sample sentence: Although the situation seems difficult now, we
  have faith that things will eventually work out well.

Appendix 3: **Sample discussion string for 1st prompt (excerpt)**
Prompt: Why did you choose the book?

Three Great Plays of Shakespeare

Student A: "I chose this book because I didn't have chance to read the
story of Shakespeare until now. This book is included three famous
Shakespeare's story, 'Romeo and Juliet', 'King Lear' and 'Macbeth',
in one book and it was edited to short-easy reading story.
Shakespeare's story is generally told that it is difficult to read and
understand, however this book has been graded level 4 and I'm
enjoying reading."

Student B: "Your book seems so interesting!!! I wanted to read
Shakespeare but it seems so hard. But as you said, if it's a short-easy
style maybe it's not hard as the original version. If I have the chance, I
want to read that book too!!!"

Appendix 4: **Sample discussion string for 2nd prompt (excerpt)**
Prompt: Describe the setting of the story (country, town, school, etc.) and any characters that have appeared so far. What are your impressions of the characters and/or the setting?

Far from the Madding Crowd, by Thomas Hardy

Student A: "Bathsheba Everdene is a beautiful woman, so three men say they love her. However she is so greedy that she comes on every men and at last she married the wrong man. Three men shocked this, but two man continued to love her. Gabriel Oak is one of those man. He failed in love with her, but he always gave support to her and in the end his wish comes true. Why.... This book is very interesting, and if you once start to read this book, you can never stop to read! I thought I recomend this book everyone."

Student B: "Hi. Where is this story located? What did the other man who continued to love her do? Did he gave up her?"

Student A: "Thenk you for your massage. I reply your question. This story takes place in the beautiful countryside of the south of England. Boldwood also continued to love her, but his was nervous breakdown and came to have a grudge to her first husband. At last he didn't love hre anymore."

Appendix 5: **Sample discussion string for 3rd prompt (excerpt)**
Prompt: Describe the main character of the story (appearance, age, personality) and his/her relationship with other characters. Then summarize the plot of the story so far.

Strangers on a Train, by Patricia Highsmith

Student A: "The main characters of this book are Guy Haines and
Charley Bruno.They are strangers. They met on a train first. Guy has
wife but they are separated. Charley hates his father because he wants
Chariey to go into his business and never gives Charley money.
Charley tempts Guy to murder!!"

Student B: "Hi. I read your massage, and now I have some questions.
Charley tried to kill his father with Guy, didn't he? Why did he
decided to kill his father with Guy? Did Guy say 'yes'? Please tell
me."

Student A: "I'm sorry. It lacks my explanation. Charley told Guy
'you murder my father and I will kill your wife.' Because Guy start to
hate his wife. Chaley thought it was good chance to murder."

Student B: "Oh, I see thank you. I try to read your book next time. By
the way do Guy's wife and Charley's father already die? How do they
kill them? Please tell me if you know."

Student A: "Both don't die yet. Guy refused Charley's offer to
become a murder. However, his mind may change. If they die, I'll tell
you about that!!"

Student B: "Oh, I see. Thank you. By the way why did Guy's mind
change? Did he take some money or something from Charley? I want
to know."

Student A: "Good morning!! I'm sorry my explanation caused a
mistake. I wanted to say that perhaps Guy will murder. Though Guy
doesn't murder yet, Charles murdered Guy's wife finally!!!!!"

Student B: "Good morning!! Oh, really?? Did he sucsess his murder? I want to know. Please tell me as soon as you can."

Student C: Good morning. That's very scary story! Why Guy and Chariey became to know each other even they met on a train?"

Student A: "Good morning, ♪ Guy read a book on a train. After few minutes he looked up, there was a young man opposite him. It was Charley. Guy moved near Charley and accidentally touched him. After that Charley started asking Guy many things."

Student C: "Thank you! That's interesting meeting. Hopwever, why did Guy become to murder? What was Guy said from Charley?"

Student A: "Good morning, ☆ Guy doesn't become a murder until now. Guy told Charley that he wasn't in good with his wife. As Charley heard that, he asked Guy to murder."

Student C: "It's terrible! Guy and Charley weren't in good with other people each other, were they? I think, keeping human rerations good is not so easy but very important."

Student A: "Good morning!! I think so too! I think we should cherish companionship."

Appendix 6: Sample discussion string for 4th prompt (excerpt)
Prompt: Quote your favorite line in the book and explain its meaning. Describe the context in which the line occurs and tell why it is significant to you. OR
Quote an important line in the book and explain its meaning.

Describe the context in which the line occurs and tell why it is significant to the story.

Stories of Courage, by Clare Swain

Student A: "Ane burned her body in accident and she was told the doctor she could never run again. But she said 'I will run again.' Then, she was winning againnst pain. 'If I don't run again', she said, 'I will die.' When she won the silver medal ,she said 'When I started running again, that gave me life.' I was surprised her courage. I know if we run into difficulties, we can change the success by the efforts."

Student B: "I was surprised too!! I can understand her passion to running. She is the person who changed her life by herself. Her true strength made her the silver medalist."

Student A: "Yes, I respect her! It is very difficult to win the silver medal. But she could win even after her misfortune. Great!!"

Student C: "She got a courage from her belief and persisted it. I think it's really hard attempt for the then her. Her attempt and victory reachied the hearts of the people."

Appendix 7: **Sample discussion string for "Recommendations" prompt (excerpt)**

Prompt: Would you recommend a book you've read to other classmates? If so, tell what you liked about the book and why you enjoyed reading it. Conversely, if you wouldn't recommend a particular book, tell why not.

Memoirs of a Geisha, by Arthur Golden

Student A: "Hello I recommand 'memoly of the geisha'. It was move 'SAYURI' in Japan. The heroine was 'Chiyo'. She was taken to Kyoto and trained to become a geisha. It was difficult way. She was given name as a geisha 'SAYURI'. It is interesting for me because it's a Japanese story but It's written in English. I read imaging the situation and what I could say in Japanese."

Student B: "I have been interested in 'SAYURI'. Geisha isso beautiful. I want to read or watch 'SAYURI'."

Student C: "I have read this. I really want to see this movie."

Student D: "I want to watch the movie 'SAYURI'... Let's watch it together!!"

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