

An Introduction to Online Sites for Extensive Reading

*** * * On the Internet * * ***

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Introduction

Extensive reading (ER) is sometimes half-jokingly called "expensive reading" since it has mainly been implemented with *graded readers* offered by the many publishers of ELT material. Graded readers are termed as such because the text has been carefully edited to bring down the complexity of both the vocabulary and syntax to a level where English learners can access the text without spending time looking up words and puzzling over the grammar. This allows them to read quickly, since another tenet of the *extensive reading approach* is that complete comprehension is not required.

This article is a compendium of sites that are possible for students and teachers to use for ER although at times the texts might be less than ideal. They might be short in length, not carefully graded, or not have topics that would appeal to your students. This is clearly not an exhaustive listing and is not intended to be a thorough review. It's a smorgasbord from which you and your students can pick and choose. The author would be happy to hear of other useful sites and will add suitable ones to a listing available at the Extensive Reading Foundation's website, <http://erfoundation.org>

Students, regardless of nationality, are generally notorious for shunning outside assignments unless the teacher has some means of keeping them accountable. Each site below mentions whether some logging system exists or whether the instructor will need to devise some sort of report mechanism to ensure accountability.

What is "Extensive Reading"?

As the name says, the students must read extensively, by which we mean much more than most students would normally do in an *intensive reading approach* that focuses on new

grammar and vocabulary and aims at full comprehension. While this is clearly needed, in most schools it tends to comprise the bulk of time spent on reading instruction.

Ideally, these other elements should be present as illustrated in Figure 1.

- Students read a **large volume of material**, perhaps 10 times or 100 times more words than they encounter in their intensive reading.
- The material should be **enjoyable** so that students will want to read more.
- In order to ensure the above, **a variety of material** should be available so that students can choose readings that interest them.
- The material needs to be **easy to read**, so that the students are not bogged down decoding the language so that ...
- They can **read quickly** with a reasonable level of comprehension without recourse to their dictionary.
- Extensive reading is not intended to supplant intensive reading, but aims to reach a **balance** between the two. Intensive reading is traditionally done **in class**, although homework assignments are a frequent component. On the other hand, since there usually is not sufficient time for students to read a large volume of material independently during class time, students should be required ideally to read **outside of class**.

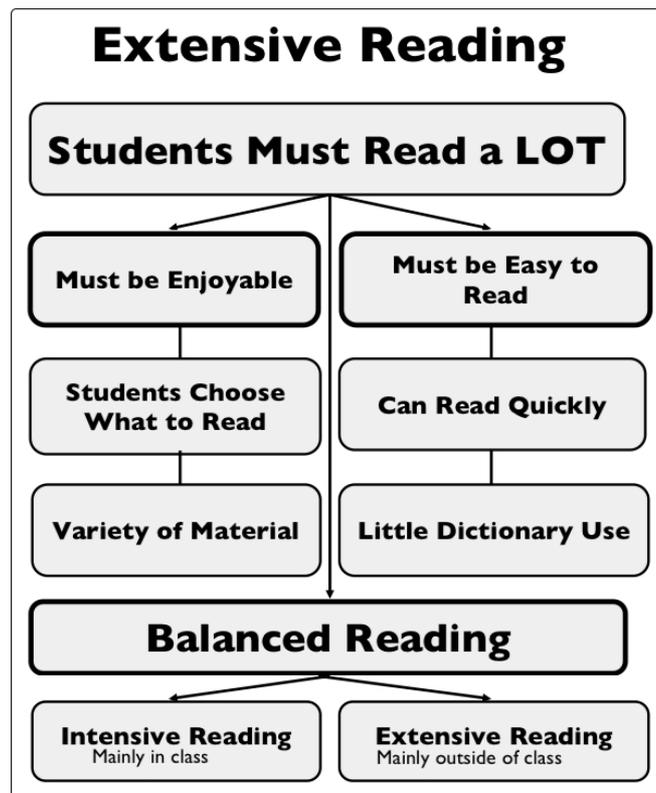


Figure 1

Sites with graded reading material

ER Central

<http://er-central.com>

This is a complete site, with free reading and listening texts from those for absolute beginners, to a few with 8000 headwords. This is great news for teachers who are searching for texts to bridge the gap between most graded readers and texts for native speakers. Most GR series end at around 3000 headwords. Teachers can track their students' reading progress and there are optional quizzes. Very useful.

It also sports a tool (Figure 6) that allows teachers to check the less common words in the text and edit the reading down to their students' level. You simply paste your text into the tool's window, set your parameters, such as the frequency list to be used and the rough number of words your students already know, and it will flag those outside of that range. You can then re-word those sections in your original document and paste it in once again to check the results.

The screenshot shows the Extensive Reading Central website. At the top left is the logo with the text 'Extensive Reading CENTRAL'. To the right are social media icons (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) and a user login field labeled 'Username'. Below the navigation bar, there are two main sections: 'STUDENT' and 'TEACHER'. The 'STUDENT' section features a 'Read' button and a preview of a text titled 'At the Basketball Game'. Below it, a list of features includes: '✓ 1000's of easy texts', '✓ 20 Levels', and '✓ Speed reading practice'. The 'TEACHER' section features a 'Listen' button and a preview of a text titled 'Summer Vacations'. Below it, a list of features includes: '✓ Over 1000 texts', '✓ Read and Listen', and '✓ Comprehension check'.

Figure 2

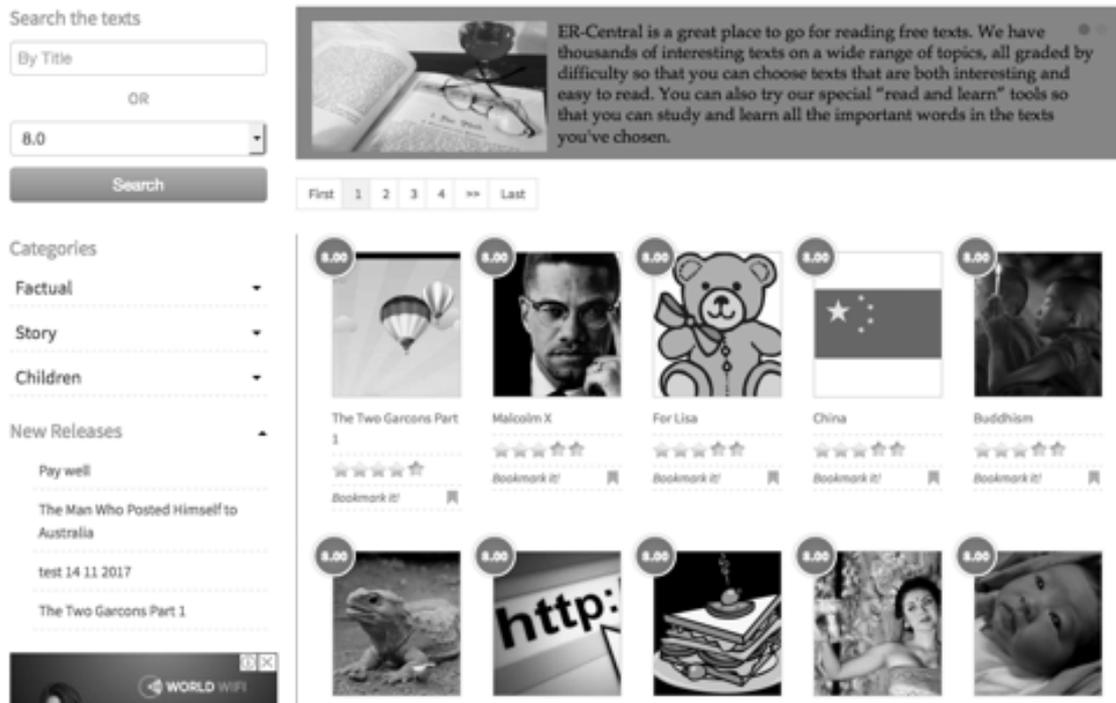


Figure 3

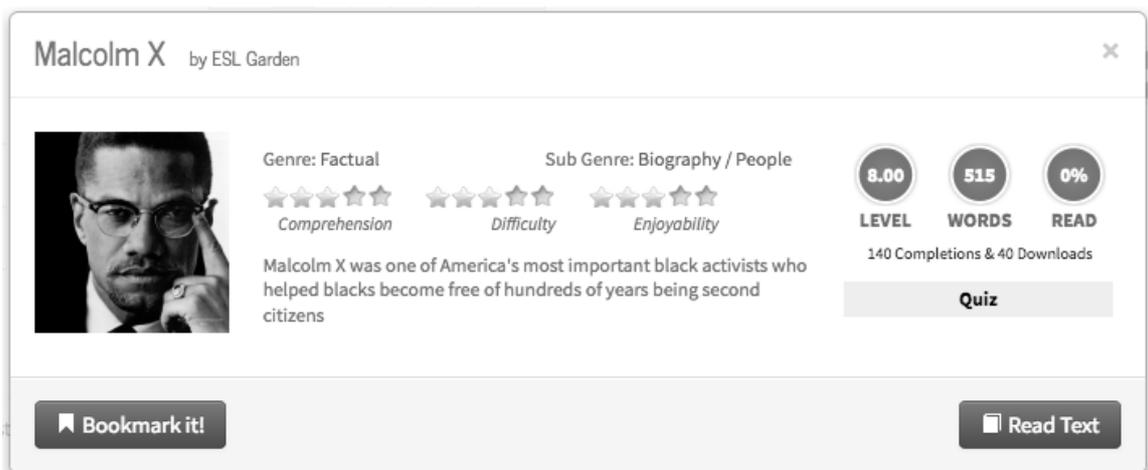


Figure 4

Total hours reading: 00 hours 00 minutes 20 seconds

Select a word and right click to learn it.

Page 1 of 3



Malcolm X

- By ESL Garden

Malcolm X was a famous black leader. He was born in 1925 with the name Malcolm Little. His father was a preacher, who believed that black people should have the same rights as white people. His father also wanted black people to live only with other black people. Many white people in his city were afraid of this preacher. Malcolm Little's father was killed when Malcolm was very young. Then, the state said his mother was crazy, and made her go to a hospital.

When he was young man, Malcolm Little sold drugs, gambled, and stole. He went to jail for 6 years when he was 20. The jail had a big library, and he read almost every book in it. He copied every word from a dictionary to teach himself writing and vocabulary. Malcolm Little became a

Figure 5



Welcome trobb49, [Logout](#)

Home Student Area Manage Students Donate Texts Learn about ER Download Data
FAQ about OGTE

SELECT WORDLIST

New GSL, New

SELECT LEVEL

NGSL Level 5 (words :)

GO!

Ignore this word

TEXT

Small

Refresh

Hide Stats

Deepen your Students' English Ability with Extensive Reading

These days, most teachers have heard the term "Extensive Reading" but many are unsure of exactly what it is and whether it is worth the effort to use this approach with their students. This article will assure you that Extensive Reading ("ER" for short) is a highly effective way to improve your students' overall English ability, will outline the basic concepts behind the approach and provide you with the basic resources to give it a try.

Extensive Reading - The basic definition

As can be imagined by the name, "Extensive Reading" means to "read a lot", but how much is "a lot"? Often it is contrasted with "Intensive Reading" which is how reading is taught in most classes around the world: Students study short texts, learn the new vocabulary and grammar and then attempt to understand the text sentence by sentence, aiming for full comprehension when they are done. Of course, this is a valuable, time-tested way for students to slowly improve their English ability, and works to some extent if they are aiming to pass a high stakes examination where reading comprehension is a central item to be tested. Sadly, however, this approach often comprises 90% or more of their time spent reading, and results in them having read perhaps fewer than 20,000 words of text over the course of an entire year!

Extensive Reading, on the other hand, aims to multiply the amount that the students read by 5, 10 or more times. Some classes that use this approach have students who have read 500,000 or even 1,000,000 words in the same period of time.

Select statistics here

Word	Level	Frequ
intensive	6	1
vocabulary	7	1
comprehensi on	7	2
multiply	6	1
TOTAL		5

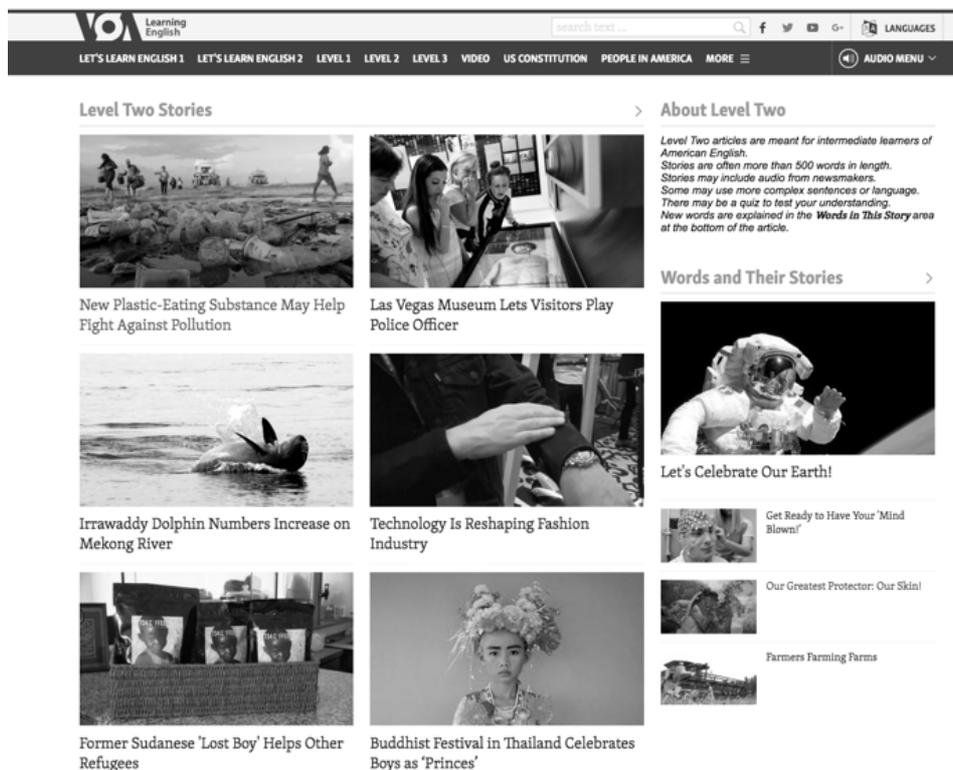
Word	Frequ
deepen	1
unsure	1
er	1
sadly	1
TOTAL	4

Figure 6

Voice of America -- Learning English Videos

<https://learningenglish.voanews.com/>

While this is billed as a "video site" all of the videos are accompanied by the full transcript and downloadable audio. Difficult words are defined and in **bold** in the transcript. It would be quite reasonable to assign one topic of the student's choice to do prior to each class lesson. Since the emphasis here is on ER, you might ask them to read the transcript first, then watch the video, and then perhaps listen to the audio with or without the transcript. Ask your students which ordering works best for them. Since usage is not logged, you will want your students to record what they have watched, perhaps with a brief one-line comment. Figure 7 shows a recent view of the VoA top page.



The screenshot displays the 'Level Two Stories' section of the Voice of America Learning English website. The page features a grid of article thumbnails, each with a small image and a title. The titles include: 'New Plastic-Eating Substance May Help Fight Against Pollution', 'Las Vegas Museum Lets Visitors Play Police Officer', 'Irrawaddy Dolphin Numbers Increase on Mekong River', 'Technology Is Reshaping Fashion Industry', 'Former Sudanese 'Lost Boy' Helps Other Refugees', and 'Buddhist Festival in Thailand Celebrates Boys as 'Princes''. To the right of the grid is an 'About Level Two' section with descriptive text and a 'Words and Their Stories' section with a 'Let's Celebrate Our Earth!' article. The website header includes navigation links for 'LET'S LEARN ENGLISH 1', 'LET'S LEARN ENGLISH 2', 'LEVEL 1', 'LEVEL 2', 'LEVEL 3', 'VIDEO', 'US CONSTITUTION', 'PEOPLE IN AMERICA', and 'MORE', along with a search bar and social media icons.

Figure 7

Voice of America - Audio with transcripts

<http://www.manythings.org/k/reading.html>

The Voice of America created a series of broadcasts in "Special English" on a wide variety of topics concerning America. While these are accessible from VOA with difficulty, Charles and Larry Kelly (Nagoya, Japan) have harvested the audio and texts and presented them on their "Many Things" site in nicely categorized lists. There are individual lists for animals, health, history, people and a number of other categories. The material is wonderful, but there is no logging of the students' accesses, so the instructor will need to create a mechanism for students to keep track of their study. Figure 8 shows just the top of a very long list of biographies further categorized by each individual's realm of activity.

Stories About People (Biographies)

Text & MP3 Files

There are 265 fifteen-minute MP3 files and 11 shorter MP3 files. That is about 66 hours of listening.

Activists & People Important to Social Reform

- Betty Friedan - Women's Rights
- Cesar Chavez - Labor Activist
- Frederick Douglass - African-Americans's Rights
- Jane Jacobs - Activist, Writer, Moral Thinker And Economist
- Labor Leaders: Samuel Gompers, John L. Lewis, Walter Reuther, A. Philip Randolph, and Cesar Chavez
- Margaret Sanger - Led the Fight for Birth Control for Women
- Martin Luther King, Jr. - Part 1 - African-Americans's Rights
- Martin Luther King, Jr. - Part 2
- Molly Brown
- Rosa Parks - - African-Americans's Rights
- Samuel Gompers - 'The Grand Old Man of Labor'
- Susan B. Anthony - Women's Rights
- W.E.B. Du Bois - African-Americans's Rights
- **Note:** Many people listed in other categories were also activists.

Figure 8

Project Gutenberg

<http://gutenberg.org>

The late Michael Hart, founder of Project Gutenberg (in 1971) was the author of the first "On the Internet" article, in [Volume 1, Issue 1 of TESL-EJ](#). Since then, the project has grown from around 100 texts to over 56,000 according to their current top page. The texts are in the original language, so do not meet some of the criteria for graded, usable ER texts. Nevertheless, they are copyright free, so teachers can download and adopt them at will, perhaps employing ER-Central's [Text Helper tool](#) to hunt out and simplify the difficult vocabulary.

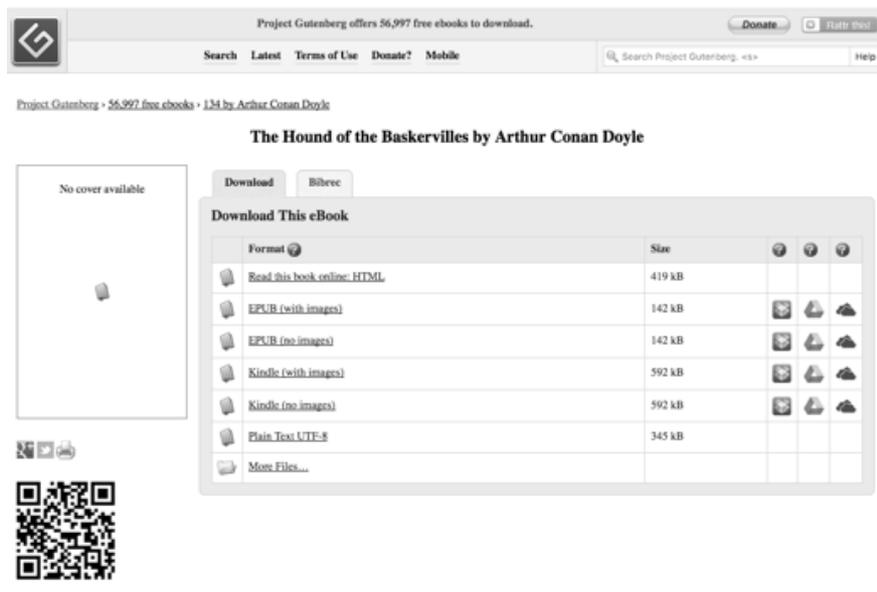


Figure 9

ReadTheory

<https://readtheory.org/>

ReadTheory is a free site targeted at American native speaking learners. The site is "adaptive," displaying texts to the students at whatever level the site determines them to be, and then increments their level slowly. Each short reading has a single multiple choice comprehension question. While the site does have a logging system, it is very idiosyncratic. The students actually have to invite their instructor to view their records rather than the other way round.

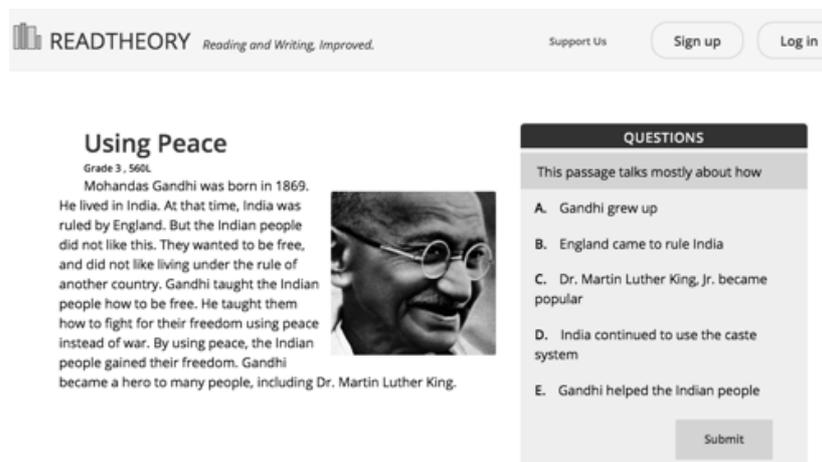


Figure 10

According to promotional material at ReadTheory's web site, the developers invite teachers to:

"Accompany your students on a journey through our vast library of reading comprehension content. ReadTheory's adaptive approach fosters improvement by automatically meeting learners at their own, individual ability levels. Signup takes seconds and no time is spent vetting assignments. Progress is shown on an intuitive report, replete with actionable, meaningful insights. Our program is completely free.

7.4 million students have completed 130 million quizzes on ReadTheory to date."

BBC Learning English

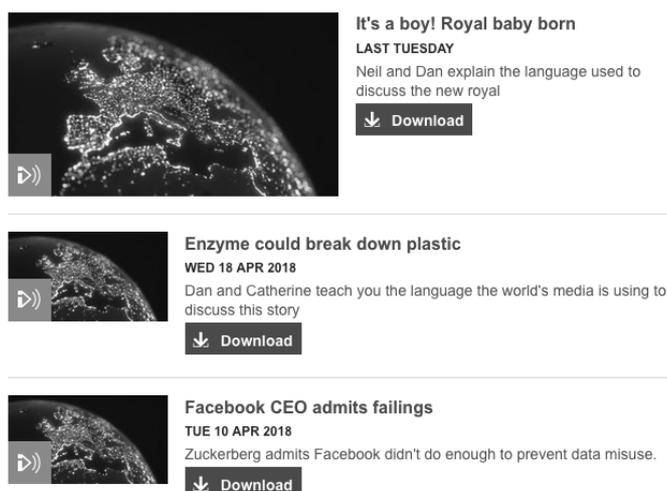
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/>

BBC Learning English is known for its consistently excellent quality and its stimulating content. The articles are designed more for listening than reading, but do not have a means for teachers to track students' access. While the top page is constantly changing, most previous articles are archived and accessible. Each article has a downloadable audio file (Figure 12), plus the text of the broadcast as well as one or more activities based on it.



Figure 11

Episodes to download



It's a boy! Royal baby born
LAST TUESDAY
Neil and Dan explain the language used to discuss the new royal
[Download](#)

Enzyme could break down plastic
WED 18 APR 2018
Dan and Catherine teach you the language the world's media is using to discuss this story
[Download](#)

Facebook CEO admits failings
TUE 10 APR 2018
Zuckerberg admits Facebook didn't do enough to prevent data misuse.
[Download](#)

Figure 12

Adult Learning Activities by the California Distance Learning Project

<http://www.cdplonline.org/index.cfm>

While this project is no longer active, the material that was developed is still maintained through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The material is targeted at American ESL students, so there may be topics that might be irrelevant to students in other regions. No logging system is available. Figure 13 shows just one of the many categories on the site.



Story List

Select the name of the story you want to read, or [pick another topic](#).

- [Bad Fish to be Destroyed](#)
- [Body Scan](#)
- [Burning Wood Bad for the Air](#)
- [California Toxic Spill](#)
- [Californians Want to Fight Global Warming](#)
- [Cancer Center Announces Expansion](#)
- [Cell Phone Safety](#)
- [Companies Charged to Send E-Mail](#)
- [Company Offers Eye Care to Hurricane Victims](#)
- [Computer Virus](#)
- [Computers in the Classroom](#)
- [Council May Purchase Needles](#)
- [County Starts Using Electric Buses](#)
- [DNA Solves Very Old Murder](#)
- [Do you ChaCha?](#)
- [Donor Needed for Baby](#)
- [Earthquake Could be Worse than Hurricane](#)
- [Earthquake Exhibit at Now Open at State Capitol](#)
- [Fast Car](#)
- [Film Made About UFO's](#)
- [Google It!](#)
- [High Seas](#)
- [Historic Letters Get Responses](#)
- [Hurricanes Could Be Caused by Warm Weather](#)
- [Man Coughs Up Nail](#)
- [Nature Sounds](#)
- [Nuclear Scientists](#)
- [Organ Donations](#)
- [Parents Warned About Technology and Drug Use](#)
- [Photographers Gather at Yosemite](#)
- [Ready, Click, Spend!](#)
- [Ruling by the Courts](#)
- [Save the Forest](#)
- [Sensible Driving Can Save Fuel](#)
- [Smokers Have New Way to Quit](#)
- [Snow Levels Are Just Average](#)
- [Some New Cars Save Gas](#)
- [Student on Trial for Changing Grades](#)
- [Students and Satellites](#)
- [T-Rex](#)
- [Video Games](#)
- [Volcano by the Sea](#)
- [Voting Machines Go Through More Testing](#)
- [World's Largest Motorcycle](#)

Figure 13

Time for Kids

<https://www.timeforkids.com/>

The articles on this site, by the publishers of *Time Magazine*, are graded by U.S. elementary school grade levels, but each specific article has a dropdown menu with three choices of reading level, as measured in Lexiles, as can be seen in Figure 14, below. These samples were extracted from "Kids of Kakuma" for grades 3 & 4, as it appeared on April 20, 2018. The current articles are free, but there is a subscription service that offers a weekly print edition and access to the entire *Time Magazine* archives.

L540 -- **KAKUMA, Kenya** — Wild animals roamed at night. But Rose Peter still slept outside. So did the 19 other children she was with.

L660 -- **KAKUMA, Kenya** — Wild animals roamed at night. But Rose Peter and the 19 other children she was with still slept outside.

L800 -- **KAKUMA, Kenya** — Wild animals roamed at night, but Rose Peter and the 19 other children she was with still managed to sleep in the bush.



The screenshot shows the Time for Kids website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with a hamburger menu icon, the 'TIME KIDS' logo, and a grade level selector set to '3-4'. To the right of the logo are links for 'Who We Are', 'What We Are', 'Pricing', and 'Su'. Below the navigation bar is a secondary bar with a 'Reading Level 820L' dropdown menu, and buttons for 'Read Aloud', 'En Español', and 'Print'. The main content area features the article 'The Best Medicine' under the category 'Health | The Human Body'. The article is dated 'April 21, 2017' and is by 'Mandy Oaklander with reporting by Glenn Greenberg'. Below the text is a black and white photograph of four young boys running on a track, captured with a motion blur effect.

Figure 14

Wikipedia in Simple English

<https://simple.wikipedia.org/>



Figure 15

Figure 15 shows the top page of Simple English Wikipedia. Many of the articles are written using the 850-word restricted vocabulary of "Basic English", while others appear to be written simply by the author's intuitive feeling of what is "simple". Thus the articles are not finely graded but rather 'laundered' to remove difficult words and syntax. Here is a site where any teacher can actually contribute new texts, as mentioned in the quotation below from their top page.

Part of the text in Figure 15 explains how teachers can contribute to the site:

"Wikipedias are places where people work together to write encyclopedias in different languages. We use Simple English words and grammar here. The Simple English Wikipedia is for everyone! That includes children and adults who are learning English. There are 133,266 articles on the Simple English Wikipedia. All of the pages are free to use. They have all been published under both the Creative Commons Attribution/Share-Alike License 3.0 and the GNU Free Documentation License. You can help here! You may change these pages and make new pages. Read the help pages and other good pages to learn how to write pages here. If you need help, you may ask questions at Simple talk."

"When writing articles here:

- Use Basic English vocabulary and shorter sentences. This allows people to understand normally complex terms or phrases.

- Write good pages. The best encyclopedia pages have useful, well-written information.
- Use the pages to learn and teach. These pages can help people learn English. You can also use them to make a new Wikipedia to help other people.
- Simple does not mean short. Writing in Simple English means that simple words are used. It does not mean readers want basic information. Articles do not have to be short to be simple; expand articles, add details, but use basic vocabulary.
- Be bold! Your article does not have to be perfect, because other editors will fix it and make it better. And most importantly, do not be afraid to start and make articles better yourself"

Paid Services

The two paid services mentioned here are ones that I have personally used and feel are a worthwhile investment.

Raz-Kids

<https://www.raz-kids.com/>

\$109.95 per class.

This site was recommended by some other ESL teachers so I tried it out. My students liked the readings and could run through a number of them rapidly. It has a gamified atmosphere and students can listen to the audio of each book, and take a quiz on the content. A "class" can have up to 36 students. You can swap students in and out at will, although this would complicate the record-keeping function. There is a 14-day free trial. Many of the readings repeat at higher levels with more complex language. According to information found [on the website](#):

"With billions of leveled readers already accessed across the world, Raz-Kids is an award-winning resource that provides a library of differentiated books at 29 levels of difficulty [that] students use to practice reading in school, at home, or on the go. Digital and mobile access means that students get the personalized reading practice they need anytime, anywhere. And with easy-to-use online controls, teachers can quickly manage and track their students' reading progress in a matter of minutes."



Figure 16

Raz-Kids does offer a special "ELL Edition" tailored to the needs of English learners, most likely tailored to students in the U.S. and Canada, but in order to use it, each class must purchase the Raz-Plus version for \$199.95 and then an additional \$60 per class.

Xreading.com

<https://xreading.com/>

Xreading is relatively inexpensive paid service that provides digital graded readers from many major publishers. It's the only site that I know of that has readings from multiple publishers (some of these are listed in Figure 17). The site provides a tracking function that allows teachers to see their current word count, their reading speed and how well they did on their post-reading quiz. Audio is also available for most titles. (Disclaimer: The author is a consultant to this company.)

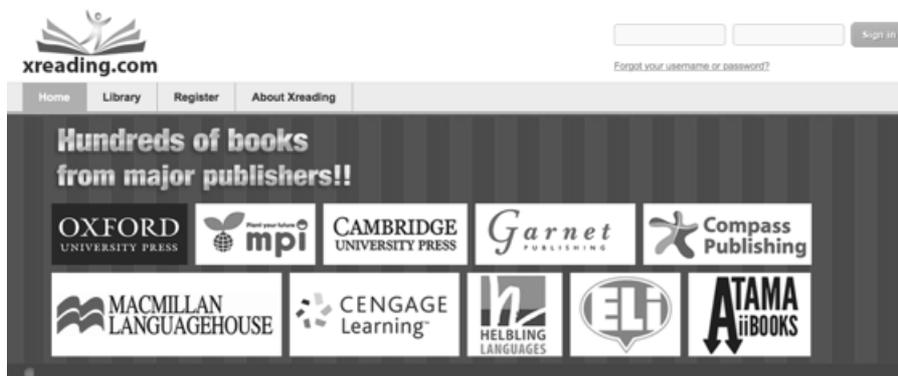


Figure 17

Tracking your Students' Reading

If you are not using graded readers, and the site you are using does not have a tracking/logging function, then you will likely want to create a system for your students to reliability report what they have read.

Although you will have to rely on your students' sense of honesty, you could create a Google Drive spreadsheet with one tab for each student, where they can fill in the title and source of the reading, the approximate word count and a brief reaction to the content. You can also create a "Master tab" with the names (or nicknames) of all of your students in Column "A" with a link in Column "B" to each student's total on their personal tab. This would allow you to quickly review their progress. See a sample [here](#) that you can copy.

On the other hand, and if you *are* using graded readers, here is a viable no-cost solution for you: [MReader.org](#), created and managed by the author (blush). This site, sponsored by the Extensive Reading Foundation, offers a highly gamified site where the students take short, easy quizzes on the books that they have read, receiving the word count and the cover image of each book on their own home page. One individual at each school registers for a site and then helps the other instructors create their classes and register their students. Figure 18 shows a typical student page.

The screenshot shows a student profile page on MReader.org. At the top, there are navigation buttons: Tips, View Available Quizzes, School summary, and Report a problem. The user is logged in as Sakata, Mizuki. Below this, there is a section titled "Books read in this course" with six book covers: "Too Old to Rock and Roll and Other Stories", "The Mystery of Allegra", "Red Dog", "Voodoo Island", "Romeo and Juliet", and "Love Story".

The main section is titled "Reading Report For: Sakata, Mizuki". It includes options to show or hide the student's name and progress notifications. Below this is a table with the following data:

Date	Publisher	Book title	Level	Status	Words	Total words
20 Oct 2014	Oxford Bookworms	Too Old to Rock and Roll and Other Stories	Stage 2 [5]	Passed	5310	5310
22 Oct 2014	Oxford Bookworms	The Mystery of Allegra	Stage 2 [5]	Passed	6115	11425
14 Nov 2014	Oxford Bookworms	Red Dog	Stage 2 [5]	Passed	7662	19087
24 Nov 2014	Oxford Bookworms	Voodoo Island	Stage 2 [5]	Passed	5910	24997
13 Dec 2014	Oxford Bookworms	Romeo and Juliet	Stage 2 [5]	Passed	6306	31303
6 Jan 2015	Oxford Bookworms	Love Story	Stage 3 [6]	Passed	5945	37248

Below the table, there are two statistics: "Total words read in this course: 37248" and "Total words read in all courses: 423558". A progress bar shows the current level (5) and a goal line (GOAL) at approximately 37.5 on a scale of 0 to 50. The current level is indicated by a dark bar up to 5. Below the progress bar, it says "Your current level: 5" and "You can take a quiz now." There is a search bar with the text "To find a book, put a keyword from the title here!" and a "Search" button.

Figure 18

Conclusion

While many readers prefer paper-based books, particularly for school or work-related reading, many people have found that digital media works fine for pleasure reading, where no notes are needed and no books are despoiled with dog-eared pages. We will surely see even more suitable e-material come down the pike in the near future which can be used by our students for extensive reading. The main challenges are to 1) find material that is suitable for the level and preferred topics of our students and 2) finding a way of keeping track of what they have read that does not increase the burden on us already too-busy teachers. This article has noted how both these issues are addressed through the sites discussed here.

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