

Students' perceptions of reading response journals and MReader quizzes

Ronan Brown

Abstract

The reading response notebook has been regarded as an effective means of involving students in genuine reading and writing activities. I have implemented an extensive-reading response notebook in my reading-skills courses. This paper presents the rationale behind the use of this notebook in language learning and the procedures of my instruction. Students' perceptions of their extensive reading and notebook-writing experiences are examined. Findings obtained from a small research study indicate that students give broad support to writing their responses in a dedicated notebook when reading fiction, and perceive the approach as a positive means of developing reading and writing skills.

Introduction

This paper will discuss and outline the reading response journal/extensive-reading notebook, a key component of two Department of Literature courses, Reading Skills IB and Reading Skills II. The completion and final submission of this journal/notebook is essential if students are to succeed on these courses. Re-designed by the author in 2008, Reading Skills IA (RSIA), Reading Skills IB (RSIB) and Reading Skills II (RSII) are three required reading-skills classes in the current English language program at the Department of Literature. Whereas RSII is a second-year course, RSIA and RSIB are offered to first-year students, in the first and second semesters respectively. Each class meets once a week for 90 minutes for fifteen weeks per semester. Usually there are between forty to forty-five students in each class. According to their scores on the TOEFL-ITP (Test of English as a Foreign Language – Institutional Testing Program), RSIB and RSII students are placed into one of three levels: 211 (lower), 212 (mid), and 213 (higher). The three courses have a common textbook, *Cover to Cover 1, 2, and 3* (OUP, 2008) for RSIA, RSIB, and RSII respectively.

Background

Extensive-reading programs/components generally share a common goal, i.e., students read large amounts of self-selected, graded texts in an environment that promotes the enjoyment of reading in a second or foreign language (Bamford & Day, 2004). The pedagogical benefits of extensive reading in English language teaching are now well established. Contemporary research has shown that students who read extensively consistently outperform those who do not with regard to reading rate and reading comprehension (Beglar, Hunt & Kite, 2012; Robb & Kano, 2013). Nation (2015) argues that a substantial amount of extensive reading is necessary for vocabulary acquisition. He

declares that only studying a textbook is not enough; students also need to read extensively. Mason (2005) claims that her students' writing skills, spelling and vocabulary showed positive gains when they were engaged in extensive-reading activities. Finally, Lee (2012) states that participants in her extensive-reading journal study exhibited the following improvements:

...students appeared to be motivated and engaged in the reading and writing activities. They enjoyed learning with peers through the innovative tool, the online journal. Their writing skills improved and they grew into more confident English learners... Using the electronic journal proves to be a beneficial method to engage students in authentic and meaningful reading and writing activities. It also offers an alternative way to evaluate students' learning (pp. 126-127).

The chief principles remaining the same, the focus of this paper is the effectiveness of a physical extensive-reading journal kept for 15 weeks by our reading-skills students, as opposed to Lee's (2012) online version. We now turn to the two courses, RSIB and RSII, of which 60% of the final grade is based on extensive reading.

Reading Skills IB

There are four strands to this course: (a) intensive reading, (b) reading strategies, (c) vocabulary practice, and (d) extensive reading (ER). Intensive reading involves students in textbook reading of twelve timed and twelve un-timed reading passages of expository prose that are each approximately 550 words in length, the subject matter of which covers interesting social and cultural issues. The readings are relatively challenging and include unfamiliar vocabulary. Each textbook unit also introduces and practices two reading strategies: one comprehension-focused, the other fluency-focused. *Cover to Cover 2 (CTC2)* Unit 5, for instance, practices the making of correct inferences, and promotes skill in the recognition of transition words. Teachers monitoring the timed passages, followed by students recording their reading rates on charts in the textbook further enhance fluency and promote the attainment of appropriate reading speeds, c.155 words per minute (wpm). From their reading of these passages, students develop and expand their knowledge of vocabulary in context. They are also given explicit practice in aspects of lexis such as prefixes, synonyms, antonyms, and collocations.

These three strands account for 40% of students' grades. The remaining 60% of their grades is devoted exclusively to ER in, e.g., the Seinan library level orange to level yellow band (600-900 headwords). On this course, students have ready access to the Seinan library ER Collection. Housing over 1500 titles, of which there are multiple copies yielding approximately 6500 graded readers/e-readers, students have at their disposal an extremely valuable and versatile resource for developing reading fluency and language knowledge. Graded into eight levels of challenge (pink-

orange-yellow-green-purple-blue-red-white), this collection allows students to read comfortably at their current level of competence in a variety of genres such as adventure, biography, crime, human interest, mystery, romance, thriller, true stories, and non-fiction. Students are required to read and report on at least one book a week in their assigned reading band (which is based on their score on the RSIA ER test in week 15). If time allows, they may later share their reading experiences in communicative activities in class. This reading course, therefore, provides a balance in which the intensive-reading work helps students notice and assimilate new language, while the ER work develops fluency and competence with known and partially known language. The work on reading strategies and vocabulary practice combine with these two strands to enhance overall progress in reading proficiency. Final grades are based on a weekly assessment of textbook work (40%), the monitoring of well-maintained ER notebooks with the mandatory number of reading points (50%), and the final test of ER (10%).

Reading Skills II

RSII follows a similar syllabus, though at a higher level, using *Cover to Cover 3*. It complements and extends the work done in the two first-year reading skills courses (RSIA & RSIB). With regards to intensive reading, the twelve timed and twelve un-timed reading passages of expository prose in the textbook are each approximately 650 words in length in RSII. Again, each textbook unit introduces and practices two reading strategies: one comprehension-focused, the other fluency-focused. In RSII, textbook Unit 5, for instance, practices identifying meaning from context, and promotes skill in previewing and predicting. Teachers monitoring the timed passages, followed by students recording their reading rates on charts further enhance fluency and promote the attainment of appropriate reading speeds, c. 165 wpm. From their reading of these passages, students develop and expand their knowledge of vocabulary in context. They are also given explicit practice in aspects of lexis such as synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, and further work on prefixes and suffixes.

These three strands account for 40% of students' final grades. The remaining 60% of their grades is devoted exclusively to ER in, e.g., the Seinan library level yellow to level green band (900-1400 headwords). Students are required to read and report on approximately one book a week in their assigned reading band (which is based on their score on the RSIB ER test in week 15). As with RSIB, final grades are based on a weekly assessment of textbook work (40%), the monitoring of well-maintained ER notebooks with the requisite number of reading points (50%), and the final test of ER (10%).

Extensive-Reading (ER) Notebooks

When students have finished a graded reader, they write a book report in their ER notebook. On

the first page of their reading notebook, students set out a *Personal Reading Record*, on which they enter each book's data such as its title & level, the time taken to read it, rating for difficulty, rating for interest, and the number of pages read (see Appendix B). Students are given specific guidance on how to set out and maintain their notebooks, which are used as resources, when e.g., they are orally recounting stories to classmates, reviewing vocabulary records, or writing questions/comments about passages they found challenging.

In their book reports, students enter further details such as the book's author, setting and genre, followed by a list of the main characters, which may be enhanced by character maps or family trees. Thereafter, students write a three-sentence synopsis of the plot, using, if they wish, graphic representations or drawings to enhance their interpretation of the story. The heart of the report is the student's personal response to the book where they write a more considered reader response to the literature, subjectively expressing their interpretations of the setting, characters, scenes, events, or issues raised. To encourage this response, a list of suggestions is given to students which includes items such as points in the story that interest or puzzle them, characters they liked or disliked, the most memorable scene for them, how they would change the story, and interesting topics or problems they found in the story (See Figure 1). Students' writing, therefore, is not graded for grammar or spelling, but for evidence of high levels of engagement with the content, themes and issues within the books. In addition, they are told not to spend more than 30 minutes writing a book report, as the main focus of the course is reading-skill development.

- A. Always begin your reports on a new page.
- B. Reports should be a minimum of two pages. Use single-spacing only.
- C. Write neatly and use paragraphs. Make sure it is easy for a friend to read.
- D. Illustrate your report with small pictures or drawings if you want to.
- E. Your reports will help you when discussing your reading experiences with others.
- F. Include this information:
 1. The title of the story, its author, the setting, genre, and Seinan level.
 2. The time you took to write the report (WT).
 3. A list of main characters with a little personal detail of each.
 4. A brief explanation of the meaning of the title of the book.
 5. A short synopsis. Write what the book is about in no more than three sentences.
 6. A personal response to the book in 150 words or more. For example, you could choose two or three of these ideas to write about:
 - Characters you liked/disliked, saying why;
 - Points of the story that interest or puzzle you;
 - Points of behavior that interest or puzzle you;
 - Personal experiences or thoughts similar to those written in the book;
 - The most impressive event for you;
 - The most memorable scene for you;
 - How you would change the story;
 - How you would act differently from the characters;
 - Themes or issues dealt with in the story (e.g., love, war, dignity, temptation)
 - Experiences while reading (e.g., excitement, surprise, shock, etc.)
 7. Write further comments or questions on the story.
 8. Write notes on the language, e.g., new vocabulary, idioms, and collocations.
 9. Ensure the Report is neatly written and that it is truly your own work.
 10. Sign a statement promising that you have read the whole book and that the words in the report are truly your own words.

Figure 1: Specific advice on writing book reports in ER notebooks

Students are also given a copy of a model report (see Appendix A). In addition, students are shown examples of good work done by students in previous classes; model notebooks are distributed for perusal under strict supervision.

Placement into Reading bands for RSIB

The RSIA test of ER conducted in week 15 serves as placement test for positioning RSIB students into their respective reading bands. Students' scores on this test tell us which levels of graded readers they should be reading in RSIB. These bands help ensure that students choose level-appropriate graded readers in RSIB. These tests are available from the Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading (EPER). As above, placing students in a specific band depends on their RSIA ER test scores. The following system is used.

<u>RSIA ER Test Score</u>	<u>RSIB Reading Band Advice</u>
51-58 points	Reading yellow-green books
28-50 points	Reading orange-yellow books
0-27 points	Reading pink-orange books

Figure 2: RSIB reading bands based on RSIA ER test scores

In week 1 of RSIB, students are told their RSIA ER test scores and/or their respective reading bands for RSIB. In addition, it is pointed out that: (a) to pass this course, students must read at least 10 books in their reading band over the next 15 weeks and obtain a minimum of 400 points. (In effect, this means that most students will need to read 15 books or more to get 400 points, as these books are very short). More on this point later. After reading their 10+ books and obtaining 400 points in their band, students are encouraged to try books one level up from their band.

The Requisite Number of Reading Points

As mentioned, when students have finished a graded reader, they write a book report in their reading notebook. On the first page of their notebook, they set out a *Personal Reading Record* (Appendix B). When students calculate their reading points per book, a points-per-page (ppp) system is used, based on Helgesen's (1997) "weighted pages" scheme, in which one page of a higher-level book is worth more than a page in a lower level book. The benefit of this system is that it encourages students to read at a comfortable level, and then to ascend to the upper level of their assigned band as their increasing competence allows. When students have completed ten books in their reading band, they read books in the next level up. This methodology has provided more rigor to the ER component of RSIB & RSII (Brown, 2005).

Level pink books	0.25 points-per-page
Level orange books	0.50 points-per-page
Level yellow books	0.75 points-per-page
Level green books	1.00 points-per-page
Level purple books	1.25 points-per-page
Level blue books	1.25 points-per-page
Level red books	1.25 points-per-page
Level white books	1.35 points-per-page

Figure 3: The points-per-page (ppp) system

Thus, for example, the level yellow book *Grace Darling* is 40 pages long, but has 12 pictures, so it is worth 21 points ($40 - 12 = 28$ pages $\times 0.75 = 21$ points). As seen here, when calculating points, students are reminded not to give points for pages with pictures. As another example, the level red book *The Joy Luck Club* is 105 pages long, but has seven pictures, so it is worth 123 points ($105 - 7 = 98$ pages $\times 1.25 = 123$ points). As mentioned, students are told they must read at least ten books and obtain a minimum of 400 points in their reading band to pass the RSIB course.

RSIB Reading Target and Assessment for the ER Component

<u>Grade</u>	<u>Total Points by Week 15</u>
S	550
A	500
B	450
C	400

Figure 4: RSIB reading targets and grades

As seen in Figure 4, students can essentially chose their grades for the ER component depending on how much reading they do. However, RS teachers explain and regularly reiterate an ER general rule: reading a graded-reader book a week will ensure they do well on the course, so they are advised to please aim to do this. Most students follow this advice and many exceed the requirement, reading as many as 20-25 graded readers as they try to max out their final tally of 550 points.

On RSIB and RSII courses, there are two reading-notebook inspection dates. The first inspection is in week 6, by which time students should have accumulated a minimum of 200 points (RSIB). The second inspection is in week 12, by which time students should have accumulated approximately 400 points (RSIB). Notebooks are finally submitted in week 15. These inspections are an essential means of keeping students on track, and to mitigate against the cramming of reading and writing tasks in the final weeks. As mentioned, 50% of the final grade is riding on the notebook as evidence of the extensive reading students have done through the semester.

RSIB students do a test of ER in week 15. The test (EPER) consists of two short stories with comprehension questions, one at level green, and one at level purple. This test helps indicate progress through the levels of the Seinan ER program, as well as serving as a placement test for the RSII course commencing the following April. In week 15 of the RSII course, students do a parallel version of the above test and thus progress is clearly evident when RSIB ER test scores are compared with RSII ER test scores. Thus, the RSIB test of ER conducted in week 15 serves as a placement test for RSII commencing the following April. These scores help tell us which levels of graded readers our students should be reading in RSII. With regard to RSII students' reading bands, the default band for RSII (211) class is yellow-green books; that for RSII (213) is green-purple books. RSII (212) class generally has a 50/50 balance of these two bands. However, based on their individual RSIB ER test scores, each student will be given their particular band.

<u>RSIB Score</u>	<u>RSII Reading-Band Advice</u>
54-60 points	Reading purple-blue books
38-53 points	Reading green-purple books
24-37 points	Reading yellow-green books
0-23 points	Reading orange-yellow books

Figure 5: RSII reading bands based on RSIB ER test scores

Certain RSII students may have wider bands, e.g., orange-yellow-green. This is because a range of performance factors, other than solely the RSIB ER test score, has been taken into account. These factors are as follows. (a) Students' previous reading bands in RSIB. Thus, if they were reading orange-yellow books in RSIB, they would generally read yellow-green books in RSII, rather than green-purple books. However, if they did particularly poorly or particularly well on the RSIB ER test, they are put into the wider bands orange-yellow-green or yellow-green purple respectively. (b) Similarly, if their RSIB ER test performance was poor, but the number of books read above the minimum (10) was considerable, this would put them into a wider, more challenging RSII reading band. (c) Likewise, if their RSIB ER test score was poor, but their final book-points tally considerably exceeded the minimum (400), then that would also put them into a wider, more challenging RSII reading band. It is hoped that by giving students credit for: (i) their all-round performance in their previous reading band; (ii) the number of books they read in RSIB, (ii) their final book-points tally in RSIB, and (iii) their RSIB ER test scores will ultimately yield a more accurate guide to the levels of graded readers they should be selecting in RSII class.

<u>Grade</u>	<u>Total Points by Week 15</u>
S	600
A	550
B	500
C	450

Figure 6: RSII reading targets and grades

As seen in Figure 6, students can again essentially chose their grades for the ER component. However, the ER general rule, reading a graded-reader book a week, still applies. Most students meet this requirement, and many exceed it, especially RSII (213) class, by reading as many as 15-20 graded readers as they try to max out their final tally of 600 points. As in RSIB, when students have completed ten books in their reading band, they are advised to read books in the next level up. However, they are discouraged from jumping two, three or four levels, which is sometimes attempted as we approach the end of the course, solely as a means of acquiring substantial numbers of points to ensure a top grade.

ER Notebooks, Further advice

RSII students are reminded that a three-sentence synopsis is necessary, not a summary, when writing book reports. It is also important to reiterate that the personal-response section of the report is not a place to write a summary (an increasingly misguided tendency). If students need further tips on how to respond personally, they should choose two/three ideas from the ten provided in Figure 1, point 6. In the latter part of the course, if students need additional ideas on how best to respond, they can be given the list in Figure 7 below, outlining ways of responding creatively to books (Bamford and Day, 2004).

1. *Strengths and Weaknesses*: Which character in the story do you respect most? Which character do you sympathize with most? What are these characters' strengths and weaknesses? What are yours?
2. *Lessons for Living*: What was the most surprising or interesting lesson that you learned from the story? How does that lesson connect to your own life?
3. *Letter Writing*: Imagine you are one of the main characters. Write a letter to a friend or relative explaining what has happened to you and how you feel.
4. *Diary Writing*: Imagine you are one of the main characters. Write a diary entry for a key event in the story.
5. *Manga*: Create a comic strip with simple drawings and speech bubbles for a key part of the story.
6. *Neighbors*: Imagine one of the characters in the story has moved in next door to you. What is life like with such a neighbor? Describe an imaginary day in your life when you spend time with your new neighbor.
7. *Movie Director*: You are going to make a movie of the book, but you can only include 60% of the story. What will you cut from the story so that you can make your movie? Which parts are not needed? Why?
8. *Story Journey*: Make a visual representation of the progression of the plot (opening, conflict, complications, climax, and resolution).
9. *Advice Column*: One of the characters in the story turns to you for advice about how to solve a problem in his or her life. Explain the problem and write a short letter to the character about what he or she should do to deal with the problem.
10. *Gifts*: Choose gifts for one/two main characters of a story. Explain why you chose those gifts and how the characters might feel when they receive them.

Figure 7: Responding creatively to books you have read

When students have finished a book, they choose one task from the ten listed above. They should write about half a page to one page. As well as boosting comprehension, this collection of creative ways of responding to books, promotes fluency in writing. These tasks also help students connect on a more personal level with the texts.

Students' Perceptions of the ER Notebook Requirement

If students generally find the ER notebook to be cumbersome or a nuisance, i.e., something that gets in the way of reading for enjoyment, then that would clearly indicate that the notebook is not a suitable way to monitor students' reading progress. However, if students prefer the experience of keeping an ER notebook to other measures such as doing MReader quizzes, then the notebook may be acceptable to retain as a measurement tool.

MReader online learning-management system

We will now turn to a description of MReader, the browser-based system for managing an ER program. MReader is an open-access computer program that allows students and teachers to keep track of ER progress, thus removing the need for other measures such as book reports, summaries or reading notebooks. The software contains a bank of over 4500 quizzes on both graded readers and 'youth readers' and currently has a user base of some 80,000 students in about 25 countries (Robb, 2015). Each quiz presents the student with a randomized selection of 10 items, including multiple-choice, true/false, who said...?, and drag & drop ordering-of-events questions, and is generally completed in 4-5 minutes, though students are given 15 minutes. The questions are designed to be easy in order to assess whether the student has read the book or not. The quizzes are not designed to assess how deeply the book has been understood. When students pass a quiz (i.e., score above 60%), their personal page shows that the quiz has been passed. Then, the book and the total number of words in that book are added to the student's MReader records. Accordingly, both students and teachers can view data on the number of books and the number words read, which makes it very straightforward for teachers to monitor reading progress. MReader provides a standardized system of measurement: total words read per student (rather than weighted pages read, as in RSIB & RSII). Thus, MReader provides an alternative accountability system for ER. It ensures that students are reading the books, and demonstrates that they have a reasonable, although, limited comprehension of the book. MReader is practical, efficient and student-centered in regards to managing an ER program (Truscott, 2017).

The Study

Thus, to determine students' opinions of the task of writing an ER notebook/multiple book reports, and ascertain their perceived pedagogical effectiveness in developing language skills, the following anonymous survey was conducted. A six-item questionnaire was administered in a 39-student RSII

(213) class in July 2018. Students were given approximately ten minutes at the end of class to answer the six questions. The items were a mix of closed and open-ended questions, and rankings on a three-point scale, as shown below.

1-How long did you spend writing a report?_____

2-How many MReader quizzes did you do?_____ How many did you pass?_____

3-Was it: /not useful/useful/very useful/ to do the MReader quizzes? Why?

4-After reading a book, if given the choice, would you prefer to do an MReader quiz or book report? Why?

5-Would you like to use MReader again in the future? Why?

6-Write any further comments you have on any aspect of the RSII course.

The first three questions (Q1-3) should help students consider the book reports as perhaps somewhat time-consuming (Q1), as contrasted with the promptness of the MReader quiz (Q2). Question 3 should prime students' perceptions with regard to the utility of MReader for verification of their understanding of graded readers they have read. Q5 should help consolidate students' actual feelings towards using MReader. Q6 is a completely open question on which students could write freely on any aspect of the RSII course, though it was hoped that students would use it to sign off/conclude with comments on the ER element of the course, and in particular the ER notebook requirement. Q4 is the crux of the entire survey. It was anticipated that a significant number of students would favor MReader over the "cumbersome and laborious book reports" Robb (2015, p.146).

The survey was given in week 14 of the course, a point at which students would have had sufficient training in ER and MReader to be able to knowledgeably answer the survey questions. Students' general English proficiency was in the B1-B2 CEFR range. Therefore, the students' MReader word-count reading goal was set at 100,000 words, which, though challenging, was exceeded by 12 of the students. A further 11 students had reached 50,000 words or more by week 15, while the remaining 16 students had passed quizzes yielding over 30,000 words by then.

Results

I will now share the results from the first two data-based questions, and then pick out substantive responses to the next four open-ended questions, paying particular attention to the Q4 responses.

Responding to Q1 on the questionnaire “How long did you spend writing a report?”, 56% of students reported that they spent between 30-60 minutes writing a report, while 44% said they remained within the threshold of 30 minutes, as advised in week 1. Four students said they started out spending 60-90 minutes on this task, but as the course progressed they could eventually write their reports within the recommended 30 minutes. Interestingly, none of the responses to the six questions yielded any complaints on the very considerable amount of time that over half of the students spent on writing book reports. This may indicate that students welcomed the opportunity to write freely and at length on the books they read. Being motivated literature students may also have had a bearing on this. Indeed, when responding openly to Q6, one student commented, “I think that the most helpful thing of this reading class is the book reports. Thanks to these reports I could speed up my reading. And I could write my ideas freely”.

The responses to Q2 “How many MReader quizzes did you do? How many did you pass?” yielded a mean of 12.6 quizzes taken, and a mean of 10.2 quizzes passed. These quizzes were taken both inside and outside the classroom. For training purposes, students had two sessions in CALL classrooms where they could take numerous quizzes under the supervision of an MReader administrator. After these two sessions, students were capable of accessing the MReader website at home when they had finished a graded reader and wanted to take a quiz. Although the mean was 12.6 quizzes taken, there was a wide range of quiz attempts. Ten students took between 13-17 quizzes, with varying degrees of success by passing 6-12 of them. The most consistent student took 17 quizzes and passed 13 of them. Her final word-count tally was 156,165 words.

Responding to Q3 “Was it useful or not to do the MReader quizzes?”, 64% said it was useful/very useful, while 36% claimed the quizzes were not useful to them. The most popular response was that students greatly valued being able to confirm how well they understood the contents of the graded readers they had read. Similarly, students liked being able to review and verify what they had understood from their initial reading of the story. 17 students mentioned this point, including this student who declared, “I could analyze whether I can understand the book or not”. Regarding those who claimed that MReader was not useful, the most common complaint, given by seven students, was that MReader did not have quizzes available for the books they had read.

Responding to Q4 “After reading a book, would you prefer to do an MReader quiz or book report?”, 74% declared they would rather write a report in their ER notebook, while 26% said they

would prefer to do an MReader quiz. That almost three-quarters of the students chose book reports over quizzes is a surprising result given the time and effort required to write a report compared with the speed and simplicity of answering a 10-item quiz. The most popular response was that students highly valued being able to write their thoughts and opinions on the stories. As one student put it, “the reports are helpful to think deeply about the content of the book”, another in a similar vein states, “I can review the story and think about the problem [complication]”. Likewise, this student claims, “I think it’s important to give your opinion. MReader is just a quiz, but writing in my notebook needs skill of reading, understanding and writing.” Eleven students said that writing their responses in their ER notebook was an important opportunity to develop their writing skills, and as this student put it, “Writing about the books helps me to train writing skill, too”, while another states, “I choose book reports because of the writing training I can do.” Finally, of the ten students (26%) who opted for MReader over book reports, the popular response was that it is quick and efficient and easy to confirm understanding. Thus, they can move quickly on to reading the next book.

When asked in Q5 “Would you like to use MReader again in the future?”, 85% of students gave a resounding no, with only 15% saying yes, or perhaps. When asked why they were against it, the most common response was that quiz questions asked for difficult or unimportant details, or there was a lack of consistency in terms of the difficulty-level of quizzes. It could be surmised, however, that because 74% of the students placed a high value on being able to write their reflections in their notebooks (as seen in the Q4 responses), and that by week 14 they had collated a considerable amount of ideas about the books they had read, they may have felt their notebook ‘investment’ was undermined by MReader.

Q6, the concluding question, “Write any further comments you have on any aspect of the RSII course” yielded some general responses relating to the ER element. Students reported an overall sense of accomplishment and happiness having read over 10 graded readers, written detailed reports on them, and obtained the requisite number of points to ensure a good grade. There were no responses relating to the ER notebook in particular, nor any specific references to the MReader experience, except for this diplomatic student who writes, “I think the book reports and MReader are very useful to study English”.

Discussion and conclusions

The ER notebook and MReader were appreciated by most of the students and worked well in the RSII class in this study. Nevertheless, with such motivated classes, it might be better to make MReader an option rather than a requirement. While some students found MReader satisfying, many students found it discouraging. Thus, when students are familiar with the software, the option of choosing either to do a book report or an MReader quiz might provide better coverage of

students' preferred learning styles. Indeed as Robb (2015, p.148) states:

With highly motivated students, the use of software such as MReader is less compelling, although even here, many students appreciate the opportunity to confirm that they have understood their reading and also enjoy the stamp collection aspect of the program.

Writing in the ER notebook presents students with a means of exploring, articulating, and extending their responses to works they have read. The notebook allows students to record their opinions about a particular character or incident in the book. It helps when reflecting on the progression of certain elements of the plot such as the exposition, complication, rising action, turning point, or resolution. Students also record their favorite scenes, passages or words, and note things that prove interesting or puzzling. All these behaviors help students become more involved in the reading and writing process, thereby giving a boost to comprehension and motivation. Moreover, when our RS students realize that they are not being asked to summarize or recall facts, but instead to respond to literature through writing their opinions or about personal connections to the text, they often feel less threatened and thus more motivated to read and write. Students come to read, reflect, and write more deeply, which in turn may also enhance critical thinking.

When students share their entries with classmates, the ER notebook serves as a collaborative learning instrument. At certain times, I ask students to highlight their favorite book (report), then exchange notebooks and respond with short comments. These brief written communications enhance social interaction and the fun element in the classroom. Moreover, through the notebooks, students come to realize that there exists a range of diverse experiences and backgrounds in the classroom, as well different perspectives on the reading and writing elements of the course. Furthermore, if they have read the same book as their partner, they may come to reconsider their thinking and revise their interpretation. By extension, the reading notebook can also function as a facilitator for a group discussion or presentation. During notebook exchanges, students may have noted an overlap in book titles or topics. Thus, their different reflections on the same text promote discussion and the negotiation of meaning, key elements of good literature-circle discussions (Daniels, 2002; Furr, 2011). As teachers of reading and writing skills, we have various approaches, methods and techniques in our repertoire. Keeping a reading response notebook has been shown both in the research literature and in the small study outlined here as a vital means to engage students in learning both skills.

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Appendix A

Book Report Example

Grace Darling

1. **-Author:** Tim Vicary
-Setting: The north-east of England; September, 1838.
-Genre: True story
-Level: Yellow
2. **-WT:** 0.5 hours



3. Main characters:

- Grace Darling (22). She lives with her father and mother in a lighthouse on one of the Farne Islands off the coast of NE England. Her two brothers are on the mainland of England.
- William Darling (50). He is Grace's father and a lighthouse keeper.
- Thomasin Darling (65). She is Grace's mother. She has white hair.

4. Explanation of the title:

The title refers to the name of the main character. Grace was a real person and became a national heroine in England in 1838, because she and her father saved the lives of nine people when their ship sank in a storm.

5. Short Synopsis. In no more than three sentences, write what the book is about:

Grace Darling helped rescue nine people from a sinking passenger ship. Her brothers were not there to help. Therefore, her father depended on her because he alone could not save the people from the ship.

6. Personal response:

I was very impressed by Grace's courage and strong character. Although only 22 years old and not

very tall or physically strong, she thought nothing of getting up in the middle of the night to help her father to tie down their boat, so that it wasn't washed away in the storm. That same night she alone took care of the great light while her parents slept downstairs. During the rescue the next day, I learned that she was an excellent boat handler. Although cold, wet and afraid, she pulled hard on the oars and watched the waves so that they met the front of the boat first.

I also felt that Grace had a great sense of responsibility. On page 9 she says: "Father has to try to save people. It's his job." And on page 22, she tells her parents: "We mustn't stop looking... If there is someone alive, we can't just leave them to die." Perhaps in the 19th century, when many people depended on the sea and ships, the importance of lighthouses and the people who worked in them was widely understood. Then, on page 27 Grace says: "If we don't save them, who will?" Grace and her father believe absolutely that the lives of many people at sea depend on the protection of lighthouse keepers like them.

Finally, I noticed that Grace, her family and some of the passengers had a strong belief in God. For example, before going to bed every night, Grace says her prayers. In addition, when in the boat with her father William and sensing that their rescue attempt had put them in great personal danger, she says to herself on page 29, "This is what God wants me to do." Interestingly, the passenger Daniel Donovan describes her as a gift from God, when he says to Mrs. Dawson, "Your angel is coming."

I admire Grace's courage, her sense of responsibility and strong religious belief. I believe that it was these qualities that gave her the power to help save the desperate passengers. I was happy to know that Queen Victoria wrote Grace a letter to thank her for her bravery. On the Internet, I found that there is a museum in northern England built in Grace's honor. You can find out more about the museum on this website: www.holy-island.info/gracedarling/. One day, I would like to visit the museum in person.

7. Questions:

Is it fair that the book is called *Grace Darling*? Perhaps a similar story written in the 21st century would be called William & Grace? I expect that in the 19th century such heroic acts by women were relatively unknown, because it was not a woman's job to rescue people at sea.

8. Vocabulary:

a wild sea (adj.+ n. collocation)

a screaming wind (adj.+ n. collocation)

drown (v) to die in the water because you cannot breathe

oar (n) a long piece of wood that you use to move a boat through the water

row (v) to move a boat with oars

wreck (n) a broken ship

