

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SMART READERS CLUB AND DIGITAL READING PLATFORMS IN DEVELOPING ENGLISH READING COMPETENCE AMONG UPPER-SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract: This study examines the effectiveness of Smart Readers Club and a Digital Reading Platform in developing English reading competence among upper-secondary school students. The study involved 612 students, including 317 in the experimental group and 295 in the control group. Data were collected through observation, questionnaires, testing, and a pedagogical experiment. The experimental group participated in Smart Readers Club sessions and used the Digital Reading Platform, while the control group received conventional reading instruction. The findings indicate positive changes in students' reading motivation, text comprehension, vocabulary development, and independent reading. The combined use of Smart Readers Club and the Digital Reading Platform shows potential as an effective approach to developing English reading competence.

Keywords: reading competence, Smart Readers Club, Digital Reading Platform, English language, upper-secondary students, digital learning, motivation, CEFR

Introduction

The digitalisation of education is creating new demands for foreign-language teaching, particularly in the development of students' ability to read, understand, analyse, and use texts for meaningful purposes. Reading competence involves more than decoding written language; it includes processes of comprehension, interpretation, and the strategic use of information. Effective reading instruction also needs to support learners in becoming increasingly independent readers (Alderson, 2000; Grabe, 2009). Within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, reading is considered an important receptive language activity that contributes to learners' overall communicative competence (Council of Europe, 2020).

In practice, many upper-secondary students experience difficulties when reading English texts because of unfamiliar vocabulary, lengthy texts, and limited motivation to read. As a result, reading activities may become largely focused on translation rather than on developing strategies for independent comprehension. Extensive reading, when supported by appropriate materials and learner engagement, can help develop reading fluency, vocabulary, and positive attitudes towards reading (Day & Bamford, 2002). These challenges highlight the need for approaches that combine structured reading instruction with opportunities for sustained and meaningful reading.

Against this background, the present study investigates the effectiveness of Smart Readers Club and a Digital Reading Platform in developing English reading competence among upper-secondary students. The study also aims to provide practical recommendations for integrating these approaches into English language teaching.

The Role of Smart Readers Club in Developing Reading Competence

Smart Readers Club is an innovative pedagogical model designed to foster students' regular reading habits through organised extracurricular reading activities. Club sessions are planned with attention to learners' age, language proficiency, and interests. English literary and popular-science texts are used as the basis for interactive activities. This approach is consistent with principles of extensive reading, which emphasise regular exposure to meaningful texts and the development of positive reading habits (Day & Bamford, 2002).

The reading process within the club is organised around three stages: pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading. During the pre-reading stage, students are introduced to the topic, discuss key concepts, and work with essential vocabulary. This stage activates prior knowledge and prepares learners for the text. During while-reading, students read independently or collaboratively and use strategies such as skimming and scanning to identify the main idea, important details, and unfamiliar vocabulary. Such strategies support purposeful and strategic reading (Anderson, 2008; Grabe, 2009). During the post-reading stage, students answer questions, discuss the text in groups, write brief summaries, and retell the content. These activities provide opportunities for comprehension, critical thinking, and communicative use of English.

An important advantage of Smart Readers Club is that students become active participants in the reading process. They exchange ideas, construct understanding collaboratively, and gradually develop habits of independent reading. The combination of regular reading, interaction, and purposeful follow-up tasks can help learners move beyond word-level translation towards more active engagement with texts.

The Importance of the Digital Reading Platform

Digitalisation provides additional opportunities for language learning by making reading materials and support tools more accessible. In the present study, a Digital Reading Platform was developed to support the Smart Readers Club. The platform contains texts from Grade 10 and Grade 11 English textbooks, together with additional literary and popular-science texts appropriate to approximately CEFR B1 level.

The platform is designed to enable students to read English texts at any time and place, quickly access the meanings of unfamiliar words, and consolidate their learning independently. It provides access to texts in electronic format and allows students to view explanations of unfamiliar words with a single click, save new vocabulary in a personal vocabulary list, complete short comprehension tests, and track their progress through statistics on completed reading activities. In addition, the platform enables teachers to monitor students' assigned reading tasks. These functions are intended to reduce common barriers to reading. In particular, immediate access to word explanations can reduce interruptions caused by lengthy dictionary searches and allow students to maintain continuity while reading. Vocabulary development is an important component of successful second-language reading, particularly when learners encounter unfamiliar lexical items in context (Nation, 2013). The platform also connects classroom and extracurricular reading: reading initiated in class can be continued at home, supporting more regular reading practice.

Research Results

A pedagogical experiment was conducted to examine the effectiveness of Smart Readers Club and the Digital Reading Platform. A total of 612 students participated in the study: 317 students constituted the experimental group and 295 constituted the control group. Students in the experimental group regularly participated in Smart Readers Club sessions and used the Digital Reading Platform, while students in the control group received reading instruction through conventional methods.

At the end of the experiment, positive changes were observed in students' motivation to read, text comprehension, and vocabulary-related outcomes. The reported results for the experimental group are presented below.

Indicator	Beginning	End
Interest in reading English texts	72%	91%
Interest in participating in Smart Readers Club	79.5%	92%
Understanding unfamiliar words	68%	89%
Positive attitude towards using the digital platform	65%	90%
Effectiveness of using the interactive dictionary	87%	96%
Motivation for independent reading	74%	93%

The reported figures suggest positive changes in the experimental group following the implementation of Smart Readers Club and the Digital Reading Platform. In particular, students' interest in independent reading and their reported ability to understand unfamiliar words increased. Students also evaluated the interactive dictionary and electronic tasks as useful supports for the reading process. Pedagogical observations further indicated increased interaction, exchange of ideas, and critical engagement during Smart Readers Club sessions. These observations are consistent with the view that reading instruction can be strengthened when learners are given opportunities to interact with texts and use comprehension processes beyond simple translation.

Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that Smart Readers Club and the Digital Reading Platform can serve as useful pedagogical tools for developing English reading competence among upper-secondary school students. The intervention was associated with increased interest in reading, improved text

comprehension, broader vocabulary-related outcomes, and stronger motivation for independent learning. The systematic use of pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading stages supported students' engagement with texts, while group discussions, questions, and follow-up tasks provided opportunities to develop critical thinking and communicative skills. These findings are consistent with established approaches to reading instruction that emphasise strategic reading, learner engagement, and meaningful interaction with texts.

The Digital Reading Platform also supported independent reading outside the classroom. Immediate access to vocabulary explanations, interactive tasks, and an electronic dictionary made reading more accessible, while the possibility of using the platform beyond lesson time encouraged regular reading practice. Overall, the findings suggest that Smart Readers Club can increase students' motivation to read English texts, while the Digital Reading Platform can support vocabulary development and facilitate text comprehension. Interactive reading strategies can further contribute to the development of students' critical and analytical thinking, and the integration of classroom and extracurricular reading can help foster independent learning habits. Thus, the combined use of Smart Readers Club and a Digital Reading Platform can be considered an effective pedagogical approach to developing English reading competence.

Practical Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that Smart Readers Club sessions be organised regularly as a complement to classroom reading instruction. Students should be provided with opportunities to access both textbook and supplementary texts through digital platforms, while reading tasks should be designed to foster independent reading habits. Teachers should also systematically integrate pre-reading, while-reading, and post-reading strategies into reading instruction. **CEFR-aligned criteria** can be used when assessing students' reading competence (Council of Europe, 2020). Finally, digital reading platforms should be adapted to learners' age, language proficiency, and individual learning needs.

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