# Digital Social Reading Activities with Upper Secondary EFL Students

## Teachers' Perceptions

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**Abstract** *The field of EFL education has been evolving thanks to new technologies. Digital Social Reading (DSR) is becoming a widespread practice and is integrated into language classes via smartphones to promote Foreign Language (FL) learning and Young Adult Literature (YAL) reading. The present article aims to explore the perceptions of facilitators about the benefits and challenges of a Digital Social Reading pilot project in the EFL upper secondary classroom. Four facilitators who carried out a DSR activity with a group of students from Italy (thirty-nine participants) and Hungary (thirty-eight participants) took part in this study. Qualitative data were collected through an online focus group interview. Results showed that, from teachers' perspective, DSR has great potential: it can be carried out from everywhere, has reduced costs, facilitates structured interactions, promotes reflections, and stimulates involvement. On the other hand, DSR poses some challenges, specifically concerning: distractions and lack of reading concentration, eye tiredness, tool disfunction-related frustration, and challenging teacher-student online interaction. In conclusion, data gave valuable insights into how to go about the design and coordination of a DSR project with adolescents and how to incorporate digital literacy in the EFL teaching environment.*

**Keywords** *Digital Social Reading; EFL Classroom; Educational Technology; Multimodal Literacy; Digital Reading Tools*

## Introduction

In recent years, many studies have focused on the emerging role of digital reading and digital social reading (Blyth; Bui and Macalister; Coiro; Lan et

al.; Pianzola; Rebora et al.; Sorrentino and Lauer; Joshua J Thoms and Poole; Joshua J. Thoms and Poole) and the role of this new education practice (Al-Jarf; Amer et al.; Chen et al.; Chen and Chen; Dobler; Evans; Ferguson; Hazaea and Alzubi; L. Huang; Klimova and Zamborova; Law; Nor et al.; Reiber-Kuijpers et al.; Shimray et al.; Solmaz; Tseng et al.; Zain). Many applications for smartphones, tablets or PCs have been designed to make e-reading more and more practical and user-friendly. One of the main aspects that emerged from various Digital Reading case studies is the importance of the role of the teacher (Zain). Studies suggest that, for the reading project to be successful, teachers should be very prepared on how to use the tool to provide students, from the very beginning, with tips on how to work in the digital environment together.

However, few studies have carried out an analysis of teachers' perceptions about the use of digital reading in class. Joshua J. Thoms and Poole carried out a study on digital reading in a university-level Spanish poetry course. In that study, students could work on the text using the annotation tool Highlighter. At the end of the experiment, instructors reported that the use of digital annotation tools brought social, pedagogical and performance benefits. Using these tools created a sense of community which involved especially shy students: the tool helped the teachers to understand better the students and to lead class discussions. Seeing students' comments gave them the chance to understand which parts of the text were less clear. Highlighter also helped to improve the quality of students' comments giving them time to reflect. On the other hand, the instructor pointed out that the tool can turn out to be unstable and not always user-friendly. Similarly, Yi and Choi conducted a study to investigate teachers' perceptions about incorporating multimodality in language education and found that among twenty-five participating teachers, twenty-three teachers welcomed multimodal practice. Teachers acknowledged how such practices stimulated the students, but underlined the need to reconceptualize assessment for multimodal literacies. On the other hand, though, time constraints tend to always be a limit. As Bui and Macalister emphasize, one of the major challenges for teachers is incorporating extensive reading into the program schedule, which is frequently not feasible.

The present project aimed to investigate the perceptions of facilitators related to the digital social reading activity carried out for the "DigLit – Lit. Up Your Phone" project. Four facilitators were involved in the present case study. They were responsible for the design of the digital social reading activity, as well as for the administration of the activity and the guidance of the students

throughout the whole project. The DigLit project was developed throughout the first four months of the school year and it was comprehensive of preliminary training for teachers and students to familiarize themselves with the DSR app, and a series of pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities carried out asynchronously using Moodle and Glose for Education (the DSR app for mobile phones). A total of seventy-seven students took part in the DigLit project, they were divided into four groups composed of four/five students, and each group was assigned to its favorite YAL book (chosen from the DigLit YAL book collection). In the present article we will focus exclusively on the analysis of facilitators' perceptions.

To collect facilitators' opinions about their experience with DSR, they were invited to participate in a focus group interview that was carried out online, via Zoom. The research questions that guided the focus group interview were:

- What are the facilitators' perceptions about the digital social reading project?
- What are the benefits and challenges of incorporating digital social reading activities in the EFL classroom?

## Methodology

In this part, the methodology used to gather the perceptions of the facilitators related to the digital social reading project will be presented. Four facilitators took part in the interview: two of the facilitators were the English teachers from the Italian high-school (we will refer to them as F1 and F2), the other two facilitators were researchers from the DigLit team (we will refer to them as F3 and F4).

Firstly, a focus group interview protocol was designed following Creswell and Creswell guidelines. The focus group interview protocol included the following steps:

- Introducing the participants to the focus group by stating the aim of the meeting and the ground rules that would drive the conversation (five minutes).
- Involving participants in a warm-up activity (fifteen minutes) to gather their overall opinions about the digital social reading project. In this phase, they were asked to access an interactive platform, Mentimeter, and answer

the following question, "Think about the Digital Social Reading Experience of the past months. Can you choose three words to describe it?"
- Discussion with the participants about their experience as facilitators (one hour). To guide the discussion a ThingLink interactive poster was created. The poster presented five thematic areas: screen reading and paper reading, platform usability, the efficacy of the prompts, group formation, student interaction, and facilitator experience.

After having designed the focus group interview protocol, an online meeting was scheduled. The meeting took place online and lasted approximately seventy-five minutes. The video call was recorded using Zoom and the audio file was then transcribed. At this point, the qualitative data was analyzed following Creswell and Creswell guidelines.

## Results

The facilitators involved in the project expressed their appreciation for traditional paper reading due to tactile engagement and immersive qualities but recognized the potential of digital reading, particularly for younger generations. Reading digitally with tablets and e-readers has many advantages: it enables readers to access texts anywhere, anytime (F1*: I prefer, paper books. . . anyway. . . I can see my sons, for example, use a Kindle. When they read, they prefer it. Absolutely. They don't go, I don't know, to the library.)* and it is cost-effective and accessible by everyone who owns a smartphone (F4: *I also read on my phone, and I also read on tablets. Due also to some books being really expensive, I just download them as e-paper, e-book or so on;* F4:*. . . smartphone is that it's the only digital device that the majority of students have nowadays across Europe.)*. However, concentration issues and device-related distractions make digital reading challenging. What is more, smartphones tend to be associated with light and fun tasks (F4: *On my phone I spend easily, you know, 20 minutes just scrolling or, you know, writing, texting, somebody watching some videos, whereas really focusing on 20 minutes reading. . . It is, it's really hard*). In addition, e-readers like smartphones can cause eye strain and headaches related to blue light and device size, facilitators say (F1:*. . . it was really demanding for her (a student) eyes to read on her smartphone because of the blue light, because of the eyesight problems. . . ;* F3: *I mean, most of them talked about having headaches, that their eyes, you know, hitched at some point.*). Despite these

drawbacks, digital platforms present opportunities for interactive features that enhance engagement and collaboration among students.

When it comes to platforms like Moodle and Glose for Education, facilitators said to appreciate their utility but also recognize limitations. Moodle was useful for organizing and structuring discussions, while Glose had many engaging features such as highlighters and comment boxes (F4: *I think the emojis and all that stuff work quite well. (. . .) Not all of them are so eloquent with writing, you know? Mm-hmm. . . or discussing it in like words, but it's so much more fun if you can just throw out an image or you throw out this.*). However, Glose tends to present glitches and is limited in terms of data reporting capabilities (F3: *(On Glose) you can't highlight the extent that you want. . . it is a little bit, you know, frustrating for me as well as for the students. I think sometimes it has some glitches, like if you want, on your phone, to click on the dictionary, for example, sometimes it just shuts down and you have to go back and go on the app again. If you look at the statistics, I realized that it doesn't give you the real number of annotations per student because it only counts when the student does an initial annotation. But if he or she responds to someone else, the app doesn't count it in.)*. Overall, the use of two platforms seems to add complexity for students and is redundant.

Prompts were valuable tools to guide student engagement and comprehension, promoting critical thinking and supporting discussion and student participation. Well-designed prompts can stimulate insightful reflections and encourage connections between texts and the real world (F4: *I think the great advantage that (multimodal prompts) I had was you can then connect it to the real world. Like I would give them tasks, you know, look up YouTube videos on Black Lives Matter and things like that. . . and let them critically think about "why is it important to read a book?" like "The Hate U Give", to understand our world.*) However, asynchronous discussions present challenges, such as the need for more face-to-face interactions (F1: *. . . Maybe organizing an online meeting, discussing together, reading a passage together with the teacher, discussing.*) Teachers also pointed out students' lack of effort due to the absence of grading and time constraints related to extracurricular activities and homework.

Moreover, group formation plays an extremely important role in facilitating collaboration and interaction among students. Dividing the class into small groups based on reading preferences has shown to be effective. Therefore, facilitators suggest that providing guidelines for online interaction and fostering personal connections among students before engaging in digital social reading activities can enhance communication and collaboration (F3: *what didn't work was the language behind online interaction, which we didn't give them. (. . .) When you*

*are reading with someone, when you're doing a task with someone else, you are mediating an output and you need a language to do that (. . . ) you actually need the language to agree, to disagree, to, I don't know, to refer to a comment made by someone else. So that is a competence.*)

The role of facilitators in guiding digital social reading experiences is important since it requires balance. While positive feedback can motivate students, facilitators pointed out how they felt their comments could at times have interrupted students' interactions (F3: *. . . sometimes I wanted to reply to the students, but I stopped myself because I didn't want to interfere too much. . . ;* F2: *Well, they were all my students, so I always felt like it was an intrusion.*) To conclude, building relationships with students and providing opportunities for face-to-face interactions can foster a sense of community and support meaningful engagement in digital learning environments. Despite the challenges, facilitators found the experience both stimulating and challenging and emphasized the importance of personal connections and effective communication in facilitating online learning experiences.

## Discussion

Facilitators agree that digital social reading has great potential, especially for younger generations, while at the same time requires an additional effort from adult generations which tend to associate extensive screen reading with work activities rather than leisure ones. Reading digitally has proven to have numerous benefits, facilitators suggest, which are supported by previous research (H. Huang; Khubyari and Narafshan; Pianzola; Prados Sánchez et al.; Shimray et al.; Zain): it can be carried out from everywhere, it provides access to a wide variety of different texts becoming at times a valid alternative to the physical library and it stimulates curiosity. On the other hand, the possibility to carry out extensive reading for more than half an hour with a good concentration level can be challenging due to the small size of the smartphone, the external distracting stimuli, the temptation to change apps while reading (notifications and messages), and due to the connotation of the smartphone itself, as data shows. Interestingly, teachers suggested that smartphones tend to have a fun connotation if compared to laptops, PCs and tablets because they are often used to check social media or for quick and light tasks. More research in these terms is needed to investigate how students use their digital tools when they

do a DSR activity, how much they are distracted and whether they spend time on other apps before or after reading. Screen time tracking apps could be a helpful tool in this context for future research. To conclude, digital devices can cause eye-tiredness and headaches. Recent studies corroborate these findings: according to Kaur et al. digital eye-strain is a widespread phenomenon characterized by dry eyes, irritation, sensitivity to bright light and accommodation-related symptoms (blurred near or distant vision) which can however be mitigated by limiting daily screen time (max. four hours), using blue-light filtering glasses and taking frequent breaks following the 20–20-20 rule (taking 20s breaks every 20 minutes to look at an object 20 feet away).

As for platform choice and use, the qualitative data shows that using more than one platform to carry out the activities can provide structure but at the same time be redundant and cause disorientation. In this project, Moodle was used to introduce guidelines, provide task instructions, and wrap up the activity with written comments and reflections. This platform proved to be practical but lacked stimulation and felt somewhat redundant overall. Glose for Education was the app used to carry the Digital Social Reading. Teachers appreciated Glose because it was user-friendly, thanks to the simple and clear interface and made the reading interactive with the help of emojis, which are considered a good way to involve shy students and to stimulate spontaneous and quick user-text interaction. On the other hand, Glose presented glitches and needed to be restarted because pages did not always upload fast. Glose student-related statistics can be useful but they need to be accurate and keep track of the student's progress throughout the process, not only at the beginning. These ideas are in line with what previous research on annotation tools suggests (Al-Jarf; Azmuddin et al.; Dean; Guikema and Williams; H. Huang; Law; Michelson and Dupuy; Nor et al.; Pianzola; Joshua J Thoms and Poole): app companies could focus in the future on providing a highly customizable DR experience in terms of annotations since user text-editing is the key to deep comprehension and interaction. In addition, companies could potentiate the statistics in the app to provide detailed information about student performance, allowing teachers to give fast and accurate feedback, an idea which is also in line with the need for reconceptualizing assessment when multimodal literacies are involved (Yi and Choi).

Creating prompts and guiding the DSR experience through tasks can pose some challenges, facilitators say. Data suggests that some facilitators would have preferred to add more tasks inside the project to guide and stimulate more the students, while other facilitators considered it important to leave the stu-

dents more space for free interpretation. This is why pondering the number of tasks is essential to ensure the right balance in such a way as to avoid any overwhelming feeling, providing at the same time the right guidance in the while-reading phase. Law (2020) supported the idea that DSR tasks are the starting point for a class discussion, similarly, facilitators suggested that another important aspect was discussing the prompts in class or via videocall, to provide space for direct interaction and sharing after the reading phase. An additional suggestion, following the data, could be to read some passages together out loud and discuss them in person. Another essential variable to consider while designing a DSR activity is time. Data suggest that such a project needs time to fully exploit its potential: students need time to read, think about the text and comment, reflect on other students' comments and share their ideas face-to-face with the teacher. Lastly, while designing prompts and choosing the reading materials attention should be paid to sensible topics and how they will be absorbed within the group: in other words, teachers should consider the possibility that some themes, scenes, or descriptions can be triggering and cause strong negative emotions in students or create a tense atmosphere within the group. More research in these terms is needed to understand how to handle possible problematic situations in a digital environment.

We discovered that building a social relationship and human connection with the group is essential in both student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction: meeting students beforehand and establishing complicity is key to social interaction and participation within the digital environment. As Li et al. suggest, it is important for readers to feel the presence of the group, or audience while reading to feel involved and actively participate. Within the digital environment, group interaction and instructor facilitations need to be carefully managed. From the data collected, we saw that dividing students into small groups and assigning them to their favorite reading was the best choice. Data suggests also that the possibility to interact digitally, with emojis and comments, gave students a new motivation, even though for some students the promise of receiving a final mark would have kept them more on track, teachers say. The role of the facilitators, when it comes to answering comments and providing feedback is twofold: on one hand data shows, that teachers felt that their positive comments in Glose and Moodle were appreciated, on the other hand they experienced a feeling of intrusion inside the DSR student group and sometimes avoided commenting on the app in order not to interrupt student exchanges. We may therefore suggest that more research is needed to outline online interaction guidelines for DSR environments that can successfully

balance student-student interaction and teacher-student interaction within the same digital space. We may also add that such online behavior guidelines should be included in a pre-reading activity with students and should be part of preliminary teacher training. In conclusion, companies may also benefit from the incorporation of such guidelines in their platform to provide users with a more awakening experience from the beginning.

## Conclusions

The exploration of the qualitative data gathered from this Digital Social Reading (DSR) project offers valuable insights into the perspectives of facilitators working with young EFL learners. Facilitators unanimously acknowledged the considerable potential of digital social reading, particularly for younger generations. Digital reading presents numerous benefits, as suggested by facilitators and supported by previous research. It offers unparalleled accessibility, enabling reading from anywhere and providing access to a wide variety of texts, sometimes substituting physical libraries. However, it also poses challenges, including eye strain and headaches associated with screen exposure, or device-related distraction. Platform selection and usage reveal mixed experiences among facilitators. While Moodle offers organizational structure and functionality, it lacks stimulation. Glose for Education, on the other hand, has a user-friendly interface and interactive features, but it faces challenges such as glitches and limited data reporting in terms of student progress tracking. When designing reading prompts, striking the right balance between guidance and freedom for interpretation has proven to be essential. Moreover, time was a critical factor: extensive reading on a digital device needs to be diluted in a space of weeks to realize the potential of DSR projects. Additionally, sensitive topics within reading materials require careful consideration to avoid triggering negative emotions among students. Human connection is essential in facilitating successful DSR experiences. Establishing personal connections between students and facilitators enhances social interaction and participation within the digital environment. The role of facilitators in providing feedback and fostering interaction needs to be further explored, particularly in defining clear guidelines for online interaction within DSR environments.

Ultimately, the incorporation of online interaction guidelines and enhanced platform functionalities can contribute to a more enriching DSR experience for participants. As the digital landscape continues to evolve,

ongoing research and collaborative efforts among educators and platform developers are essential to maximize the potential of digital social reading in educational contexts.

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