

# Considering Options to Reduce Cheating on Internet-Based Quizzes

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## オンラインクイズにおける不正行為を減らすための 選択肢の検討

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### Abstract

Extensive reading is reading a large number of books that are below one's linguistic ability. To demonstrate their completion and comprehension of extensive reading books, students might also be required to answer post-reading quizzes. This research considers the issue of students cheating on the post-reading quizzes. While working to receive credit for their assignment on the extensive reading quiz website M-reader.org, some students used a variety of unethical behavior to pass post-reading quizzes without actually reading the books. The activities allegedly included taking quizzes for each other, taking quizzes simultaneously with classmates and comparing answers, and using the internet to search for answers. If this behavior was allowed to continue unabated, it would have delegitimated the purpose of using quizzes to assess students' completion rate of extensive reading. This research considers the pros and cons of students' anonymous suggestions to remedy this problem, which were submitted via Google Forms by 23 low-intermediate level students at Dokkyo University in Saitama, Japan.

**Keywords :** M-reader, cheating, academic dishonesty

多読とは、自分のレベルより低い本を大量に読むことである。本の読み終えと理解度を証明するために、学生はインターネット上の読後クイズに答えるよう求められることもある。本研究では、読後クイズにおける学生の不正行為の問題について検討する。多読クイズウェブサイト（M-reader.org）で課題の単位を取得しようとする学生の中には、実際に本を読まずに読後クイズに合格するために、さまざまな非倫理的な行為に及ぶ者もいる。その行為には、お互いに代わってクイズを受けたり、クラスメイトと同時にクイズを受けて答えを比較したり、インターネットで答えを検索したりすることが含まれていた。このような行為が放置されれば、多読の達成率を評価するためのクイズの目的が正当性を失うことになる。本研究では、この問題を解消するために、埼玉県の獨協大学で中級レベルの学生23名がGoogle フォームを通じて匿名で提出した提案内容の長所と短所を検討する。

キーワード：M-reader、不正行為、学術的不誠実さ

## Introduction

The motivation for this research began in the spring semester of 2023 when some students privately complained to their teacher that their classmates were cheating on quizzes. Students in this course were participating in extensive reading and were expected to read 100,000 words during the semester. Credit for word-counts was received when students successfully passed quizzes corresponding to the books in which they read. The quizzes were accessed via a website called M-reader.org and were intended to assess whether the students read and understood the corresponding books. The first allegation made was that dishonest students were exchanging passwords to their M-reader account, and/or trading smartphones that were already logged into the website, and taking quizzes for each other. The group of students who reported this behavior felt indignant at what they felt was unfair treatment. They asked whether it was fair for the dishonest students to receive the same class credit by cheating as they were receiving through hard work. They wanted their grades to reflect the considerable and conscientious effort they had made,

and they wanted the evaluation of the academically dishonest group downgraded. Furthermore, the concerned students revealed that the problem was not just restricted to their class, but was occurring in all of the classes in the department, and was an open secret among all of the students. The students correctly felt that this cheating delegitimated the value of including extensive reading as an aspect of assessment in the course and was inherently unfair to students who were diligently spending considerable hours on the assignment. Despite their understandable concerns, determining who the transgressive students were so that they could be reprimanded, uncovering all the unprincipled shortcuts that were used, and halting their machinations, were difficult problems to effectively resolve. This research first anonymously surveyed the students in the class, including those who were suspected of academic dishonesty, to understand what they regarded to be a warranted intervention by the teacher. Without this feedback from the students involved, it was feared that there would not be sufficient support for the remedy among those directly impacted by the teacher's decision. This lack of buy-in would potentially affect the students' motivation and impact their reading output. After collecting the students' opinions, an appraisal of the relative advantage and disadvantage of each suggestion is considered.

### Procedure: Student Survey

After learning that academically dishonest behavior was occurring in the spring 2023 class, an anonymous survey was conducted via Google Forms. The intention of the survey was to determine what type of intervention the students felt was warranted, and to allow the students to help determine what type of remedy was appropriate. Another aim of the survey was to secure the students' acceptance for whatever steps were ultimately implemented to correct the dishonest activity. Twentythree students responded to the survey and 10 students wrote that they had no ideas for how to halt the problem. The remaining 13 responses are provided here in *italics* (and edited for clarity) and responses to their suggestions are in plain text. The students were told that dishonest methods were being

used to pass the M-reader quizzes by some members of the class and that the teacher wanted suggestions for ways to fix the situation. The survey prompt was: "Please write what you think the teacher should do about the M-reader assignment. Should the teacher cancel the assignment completely? Should the teacher give everyone a 0 and then the chance to take the quizzes again? Should the teacher require book reports for every book to prove that you read it? You can write in English or Japanese."

*I think the person who shared the password should apologize honestly.* --- While it is not a bad idea to ask the students to admit and apologize for their dishonesty, it does not resolve the issue, nor is there any assurance that all (or any) of the students who cheated would confess to it.

*Set [the cheater's] M-reader score to 0%.* --- This is a good idea, but unless the students voluntarily confessed, there is no way of correctly identifying who cheated. This suggestion also does not prevent similar cheating behavior from continuing.

*It's the end of the term and I have a lot of other reports to do. I don't think I have time to write [book reports]. I think it would be better to cancel the M-reader.* --- Canceling the assignment would negate the effort of honest students and would thereby punish those who actually did the reading. Some students had read as many as 20 books by the time of this survey, so they were understandably not eager to write book reports.

*The amount of work that I have done thus far should be thrown out, and we should be given another chance to complete the goal, and we should be graded based on the new results.* --- This is a surprising suggestion for a student to make, especially someone who completed the assignment honestly the first time. This comment was most likely proposed by one of the dishonest students who wanted a way to receive credit and not be punished.

*Sorry. I have no idea, but I don't want to receive a 0 and then retake the quizzes. I did*

*my best and did 100,000 words. It is unacceptable for people who are doing well to lose score because of people who are not doing [it] right. Maybe [the teacher] should just leave it alone. No matter what method [the teacher] use[s], I don't think those people will change.* --- This is a legitimate concern. Students who honestly worked hard should not be held accountable for those who did not. Additionally, it is unclear that any action taken to remediate the situation will stop dishonest behavior such as watching the movie version of the book instead of reading it.

*Starting in the fall semester, I think it would be better to submit book reports instead of M-reader [quizzes]. If you submit handwritten book reports four times at the same time as unit tests, with a rule that you must read a certain number of words, you will be able to read the book and still get a grade.* --- Book reports are potentially one alternative to using M-reader but there are also many drawbacks to this option. First, if the issue is finding a way to prevent students from using the internet to cheat through their assignments, book reports are not the answer. What is to prevent a student from submitting a book report that was published and copied from the internet? Students can also easily use Chat-GPT or book summaries on the internet to write book reports instead of actually reading the books. Second, there are thousands of books available for the students to read, and it is unlikely that teachers are familiar with every book. How would teachers know if a student actually read a book if the teachers had not also read it? It is also unrealistic to expect a student who read many books (sometimes upwards of 20 books) to remember the details of books read early in the semester. Finally, one of the advantages of using M-reader is that it saves everyone time. The quizzes on M-reader typically require less than ten minutes for the students to take, and the teachers do not have to spend any time at all. Book reports, on the other hand, require hours of writing from the students, and hours of reading from the teachers. For these reasons, writing book reports in lieu of M-reader quizzes is a less-than-ideal solution for everyone.

*Do M-reader again* --- Resetting the M-reader scores to zero and requiring

students to retake all of the quizzes for books that they have passed is not a good suggestion. First, it gives the students a second chance to take quizzes for books even though they might not have passed the quizzes the first time. This violates the one-attempt-only rule for M-reader quizzes. Second, students may have forgotten the details of a book they read at the beginning of the semester and therefore fail the quiz when they take it a second time, even if they passed it initially. Finally, if students cheated initially, what is to prevent them from cheating again if given a second chance?

*I suggest conducting an English test at the end of the semester. This is because the purpose of M-reader is to improve reading skill in English. If students do M-reader in the correct way, their English reading skill must be improved. The English test makes it obvious if students do M-reader correctly or not. For these reasons I recommend you to conduct a test regularly.* --- This would be a good suggestion if improvement could be measured over the 14 weeks of a semester. Unfortunately, improvement in English via extensive reading is a much more gradual process. Significant change in vocabulary awareness and reading speed is not quantifiable after just one 3.5-month semester. Another factor that presumably improves through an extensive reading program is confidence, but measuring improvement in students' confidence is subjective, qualitative data, and is not measurable quantifiably through a language test. It is not clear how conducting a final exam at the end of the semester stops students from cheating on M-reader and, incidentally, a final English exam is already part of the course.

*I think that the score of the M-reader this time should be eliminated and [grades should be] decided by the score of the [final] test and the score of the submission.* --- This suggestion was likely submitted by a student who didn't pass many M-reader quizzes. Students who work hard and pass quizzes on M-reader are unlikely to suggest that those results should be thrown away. If implemented, this suggestion would reward students who did not participate, or who dishonestly participated in extensive reading because it would not hold them to account for their malpractice. Perversely, this idea would punish those

who actually completed the assignment by negating the effort they honestly exerted.

*M-reader is difficult to prove that students really took the test or actually read it. So I think making M-reader a weekly paper test is better. If you submit the task of reading a book and everyone takes the test at once in the classroom, it is clear who is learning and who is not.* --- This suggestion has several benefits. Paper tests would eliminate the possibility of students taking tests for each other. Taking tests at the same time in the classroom would restrict the possibility of helping each other during the quizzes, researching the answers on the internet or using Chat-GPT while they are taking the quizzes. However, there are also a few disadvantages. First, this student is suggesting eliminating the use of M-reader and all of the benefits the website provides. There are thousands of book quizzes on M-reader, and each quiz has several variations. It would be impractical, time consuming, and a waste of resources to prepare and grade paper quizzes for all of the students every week. Second, extensive reading is supposed to progress at the students' pace, not determined by the teacher. Fast readers will read quickly while slower readers will not, but ultimately all students (if they reach the goal) will read extensively. In principle, however, it is not a bad idea to set weekly reading goals to motivate the students to progress through the assignment. Ultimately, this student's suggestion entails sacrificing the convenience of M-reader to ensure that students are not cheating. It may be worth the trade.

*I don't want to go back and use the time I've spent on the M-reader assignments so far, so I'd like you to add assignments to write reviews and summaries for all books.* --- This suggestion is contradictory in that the student first complains about spending more time on the M-reader assignment, but then reverses that opinion and proposes doing additional assignments related to M-reader. Regarding the merits of the suggestion, this idea is similar to the one suggesting book reports and therefore suffers from the same issues. Specifically, it is unrealistic to expect students to remember the stories of books they read early in the semester, and there is no way to ensure that

the students who cheated while using M-reader will not also cheat when writing reviews and summaries by using the internet and Chat-GPT.

*It's not a good idea to throw away everyone's scores to this point, because it's a shame to do that to the students who have tried hard. It is impractical to ask us to write book reports about the books we read early in the semester because I cannot remember the contents well. I don't know what the solution to this problem is but I think asking students to start over at this point in the semester is too big of a burden on the students. Therefore the grade for the semester should be considered using the current data and not discarding the results we have completed thus far. However, starting in the fall semester I think you should not use M-reader and consider assigning a different task. ---*

This student's opinion clearly captures the issues and consequences at stake, and points to the difficulties involved in rectifying the problem. If the cheaters could be confidently identified, only they would face the consequences and the honest students who legitimately worked hard would not be overburdened by additional assignments. The problem remains that it is not possible to isolate those students who acted dishonestly so any remediation would need to be applied to every student, which would effectively ask the honest students to do twice as much work as those who cheated the first time. This would be inequitable and unlikely to generate buy-in from the students who did not cheat.

## Discussion

A variety of methods were proposed and each suggestion was considered on its merits and weighed against its demerits. The best response to the cheating problem has to restrict the dishonest students from cheating without penalizing the students who are blameless. After reflecting on the students' opinions, many of their proposals were considered to be too extreme, such as requiring book reports for each book that was read, resetting the M-reader word-count levels to 0 and restarting the extensive reading assignment, and canceling the extensive reading component completely. This last suggestion would disregard the effort that honest students exhibited. Asking for book reports would not ensure that students would cease to



cheat off of the internet, and there would be no way to ensure that students actually did the reading if the teacher was unfamiliar with the books. Requiring paper quizzes to be completed in the classroom every week is perhaps the strongest suggestion because it eliminates the possibility of cheating by using the internet and it compels the students to read every week. This would help the students achieve the eponymous goal of extensive reading. The practical issue of making quizzes each week could be achieved by using the questions that have already been created for M-reader. This would require more preparation from the teacher than the current system requires, but it would meet the need to deter cheating.

It must be noted however that several key tenets of extensive reading would be sacrificed if the teacher imposed the specific reading material on the students. Hu and Nation (2000) suggest that learners must know at least 98% of the words in a fiction text for unassisted understanding. If the teacher chose material that does not meet this linguistic standard, the students would not reap the benefits of extensive reading. The assignment would be more akin to intensive reading where students must resort to using a dictionary to comprehend the material. This would slow the process and fail to achieve the goals of the project. The next principle that would be lost is the idea that students should choose to read what interests them (Day and Bamford, 2002). For example, students interested in the mystery genre can choose books such as the Sherlock Holmes stories, while those interested in nonfiction or history can read from that field, and so on. Perhaps just as importantly, Day and Bamford (2002) point out that “learners are also free, indeed encouraged, to stop reading anything they find to be too difficult, or that turns out not to be of interest.” This freedom would be lost if the teacher dictated the reading material and may affect how interested the students are in the assignment. It could be argued, on the other hand, the teacher’s assignment may be the reason students are exposed to reading material they might not have chosen by themselves, and they discover that they actually enjoy it. Another problem with imposing specific titles for a reading assignment is the student may struggle to understand it. This would violate the idea that students should be reading easily comprehensible

material (Day and Bamford, 2002). Nuttall (1996) describes “The vicious circle of the weak reader: Reads slowly; Doesn’t enjoy reading; Doesn’t read much; Doesn’t understand; Reads slowly. . .” (p. 127) and so on. Whatever policy change that is implemented should try to follow the same underlying principle of the Hippocratic oath: first do no harm. Allowing students to choose their own material, meanwhile, can help readers “enter instead the cycle of growth. . . . The virtuous circle of the good reader: Reads faster; Reads more; Understands better; Enjoys reading; Reads faster.” (Nuttall, 1996, p. 127).

One intervention that was not mentioned as a possibility is turning off access to the M-reader website outside of class time, and turning it on only during class sessions. The rationale for this approach is that students would be less likely to engage in dishonest behavior while the teacher is in the classroom with them. This action would not penalize dishonesty that occurred earlier, but it is not possible to accurately identify the perpetrators to require extra work from only them. The honest students would not be penalized through this policy change with additional assignments for the actions of their dishonest classmates. This policy would also not infringe on any of the suggestions outlined in Day and Bamford’s (2002) “Top Ten Principles for Teaching Extensive Reading.” Studying the effects of this policy change on the students’ reading and comparing the results of their output before the change was implemented, could determine the impact the change has on the students’ quiz passing rate and the amount of words they read during the semester.

## Conclusion

Students cheating while using the M-reader website to receive credit for extensive reading is a problem in need of a solution. The goals of extensive reading include improving reading fluency, better vocabulary and grammar awareness, and raising students’ confidence in reading. When dishonest students cheat, they are not fulfilling the aims of the assignment and are simultaneously demotivating honest students as well. It is not fair for hard-working students to receive the same credit on the assignment as students

who cheat. In order to reach a solution to this cheating problem, the students in a class were surveyed on their ideas going forward. A number of suggestions were proposed such as eliminating use of the M-reader website, removing extensive reading from the course requirements, writing book reports to summarize every book, and taking weekly quizzes as a group during class on paper. Each of these suggestions was considered for their respective advantages and disadvantages and, while some ideas had merit, none satisfactorily both resolved the cheating issue without inflicting additional assignments on honest members of the class. Turning off the M-reader website in between class sessions would deny students the opportunity to access any quizzes and deprive dishonest students from taking quizzes for each other or researching the answers on the internet. Restricting quiz access to in-class-only could theoretically stop those aforementioned methods of cheating, while at the same time not impose a burden on students who honestly completed the reading assignment. It is not known how such a policy change would affect the quantity of words the students read during the semester, or how it would impact their quiz passing rate. Further research will be undertaken to quantify whether those data are adversely affected or not.

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