

CALICO

INFOBYTES

March 2021

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Six Things about Digital Social Reading for Language Learning

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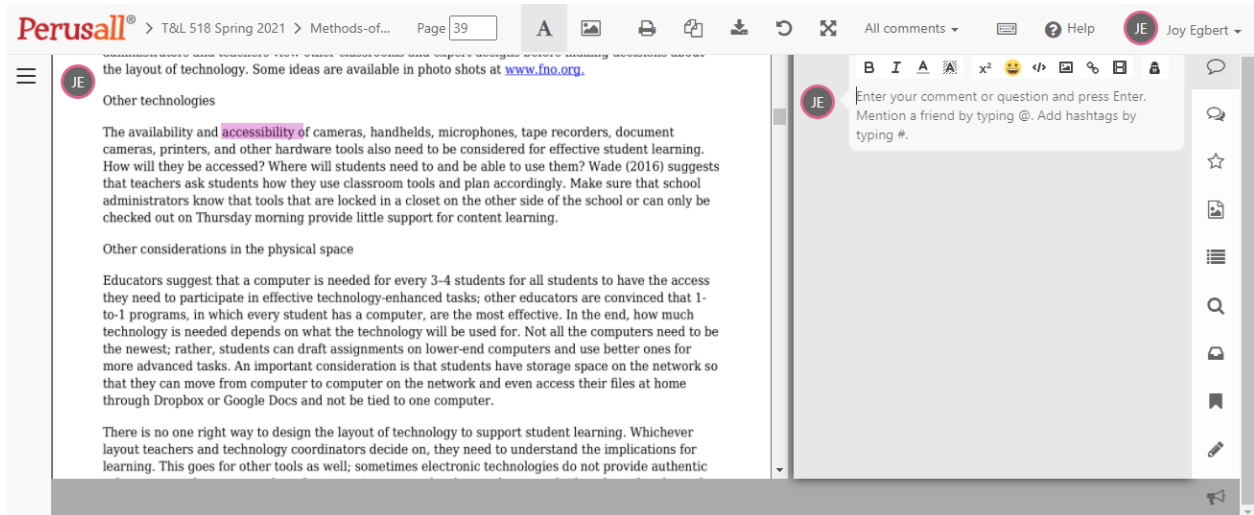
1. The nature of reading is changing.

Social reading is not a new phenomenon in language education; it has its roots in activities such as shared reading and shadow reading. However, with the advent of digital social reading (DSR) platforms that allow a new variety of affordances for and around texts, the nature of social reading is changing radically (Alber & Miller, 2012). While social reading still supports “group sensemaking, knowledge construction, and community building” (Zhu, et al, 2020, p. 262), changes include what people read, how people connect over and in what they read, and new ways that readers interact and form communities around texts.

2. DSR is not the same as reading social media.

When people hear “social reading,” they might think of reading independently on social media platforms such as Facebook or Reddit; however, digital social reading (DSR) refers to, “a form of collective reading of digital texts and communication in reader-centred communities in digital networks” (Kutzner, et al, n.p.). In language classrooms, depending on the affordances of specific apps, learners participating in DSR can express themselves and interact around texts through audio, text, and/or images. In addition, DSR allows language learners to access texts both synchronously and asynchronously; synchronous DSR shows readers’ immediate reactions to the text and can help teachers assess their learners’ reading in many ways, while asynchronous DSR provides readers with more time to think about the text and their responses to it. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of the DSR app Perusall integrated within the Canvas learning management system.

Figure 1.
Perusall in the Canvas environment.



3. Different DSR applications have different affordances.

DSR applications can be used for almost any digital text and can be accessed on multiple platforms, including web browsers (e.g., Chrome), learning management systems (LMS; e.g., Canvas), portable devices (e.g., phones with iOS or Android), and operating systems (OS; Mac, Win). In their base form, such applications usually afford students the opportunity to read the content, select parts of the content, and annotate the selected parts. In some apps, the annotations can further be tagged, grouped, highlighted, searched, and filtered. Some apps like NB, Readup, and eComma only afford text-based commenting, while apps like Hypothesis and Perusall include multimodal tools (i.e., text, picture, videos, hyperlinks, and formulas) for commenting. Many DSR apps also afford threaded replies to comments, allowing participants to interact with each other. See Table 1 for a list of applications.

Table 1.
Examples of Social Reading Applications

Tool	Platform	URL	Cost/Plan
Annotator	Web	annotatorjs.org	Free
Dropbox	Web/iOS, Android	dropbox.com	Free
eComma	Web/LMS	coerll.utexas.edu/ecomma	Free

eMargin	Web	emargin.bcu.ac.uk	Free
Google	Web/iOS, Android	drive.google.com	Free
Hypothesis	Web/LMS	hypothes.is	Free
MS Word	OS/Web/iOS, Android	office.com	Proprietary
NB	Web	nb.mit.edu	Free
Perusall	Web/LMS	perusall.com	Free
Piazza	Web/LMS	piazza.com	Free
Pressbooks	Web	pressbooks.com	Proprietary
Readup	Web	readup.com	Free
Scribd	Web	scribd.com	Proprietary

Some DSR apps require registrations and/or subscriptions to different payment plans. With free apps, however, DSR could be inexpensive and more accessible for students. For instance, even file-sharing services such as Dropbox and Google Drive could be used for DSR.

4. There are many ways to use DSR apps in language classrooms.

Zhu et al. (2020) describe 5 main classroom uses of DSR:

1. Processing domain-specific knowledge,
2. Supporting argumentation and inquiry,
3. Improving literacy skills,
4. Supporting instruction and peer assessment,
5. Connecting online learning spaces.

Within these uses, teachers can ask learners to collaborate to: critique literary texts, highlight important points, ask questions, express opinions, summarize, connect to external sources, link text to their own lives, consider other viewpoints, read critically, say what they do not understand, collect vocabulary, save instances of grammar for practice, organize ideas, predict, clarify, and interact with peers, teachers, and others. In addition, learners can focus on both language and content, write text reviews, rate texts on a variety of criteria, mark up stories according to plot/ characters/ setting, and so on. Further, DSR can aid student reflection on cultural and linguistic differences, facilitate their use of semiotic representations, encourage learners to be active consumers of text,

and support their explicit encouragement of others. Further, teachers can evaluate learner processes and progress toward goals, support 21st-century learning skills such as collaboration, creativity, and production, and support physically and developmentally challenged students by providing oral texts.

5. Effective DSR relies on good planning.

Guidelines for teachers include:

- **Make sure students understand the objectives and the goal(s) toward which they are working.** In addition, link DSR use to other classroom tasks. These actions can help to keep learners on track and be more engaged in the task. Further, be clear and straightforward about who owns the comments students make, where they go when the app is turned off or the class is over, and who can see them (Alber & Miller, 2012).
- **Provide students with the language/content knowledge they need to read the text and use the app.** Introduce the concept of DSR at an appropriate pace for the students; for example, students who use social media might be more used to posting public comments and receiving responses than those who do not. Use tutorials and allow learners sufficient practice with the tools as needed. Also model the use of the affordances that you want students to use.
- **Provide scaffolding for students before, during, and after DSR use.** Build on students' prior knowledge, use prompt questions, integrate reading strategies, and employ audio, drawings, external links, videos, dictionaries, images, and whatever tools will work best for your students and goals. Further, teachers can highlight /define challenging words before they read (Thoms & Poole, 2018). Another tip is to use what Zhu et al (2020) call "seeded annotations," (p. 263) in which teachers can include good questions and comments from previous student groups as examples.
- **Reduce students' cognitive load.** Divide the class into smaller groups if appropriate so students are not overwhelmed by the number of comments, they have time to think, and there is not so much repetition of comments. Space out the commenting periods if asynchronous so that students do not all wait until the last minute to complete the task, and remind students of what the due dates/ times are (Thoms & Poole, 2018).
- **Evaluate the use of DSR.** Looking at "learning outcomes, technology usability, inclusivity, and socio-emotional factors" (Zhu et al p. 268). Ask students about their engagement.

6. There are challenges with social reading.

Technological access and literacy need to be addressed in the design of effective DSR experiences; students must know how to use the app, as each platform may require a different workflow. For instance, in Hypothesis, students need to click the "Annotate" button after selecting the text to add a comment; however, in Perusall students simply highlight the text to annotate. For teachers, app integration and maintenance in an LMS may pose their own challenges. For instance, currently, if Hypothesis is integrated into a Canvas assignment and students visit the DSR page without adding a comment, SpeedGrader, the Canvas grading tool, falsely signals a submission entry that needs to

be graded. Therefore, careful planning and administration of the DSR task are necessary.

In addition to technological challenges, the literature points out some content-related challenges. Thoms and Pool (2018), for instance, report that an increase in the lexical diversity of texts (e.g., poems) may result in a decrease in students' interactions about the literary aspects of the texts. Educators, therefore, should be cognizant of their pedagogical objectives when assigning texts and be ready to provide students with sufficient scaffolds and supports, including reading strategies.

Another possible challenge with DSR is users' attitudes towards the medium. As Thoms and Pool (2018) note, the world of language education is still very much dependent on printed materials, and DSR may not be a popular option for teachers or learners. Compounding this issue, teachers may not have had professional development to learn about the tools and processes of conducting a DRS task. As Dean (2016) states, it is essential for educators to be engaged with DSR tools and processes so that they can promote the affordances of the tools and actively use them to motivate and engage students.

7. Conclusion

It is clear that DSR can benefit language learning and instruction; to date, research on DSR in language education has produced mostly positive results in regard to students' achievement (see, for example, Cao, 2017; Chen, et al., 2016; Yang, et al., 2011; Yeh, et al., 2017). The digital and interactive nature of DSR supports language learning in particular because it affords both a focus on language and an emphasis on language use through interaction. However, as with any technology, the use of DSR must be carefully and mindfully planned to have the most benefit.

cite as: Egbert, J. & Shahrokni, S.A. (2021, March). Six things about digital social reading for language learning. *CALICO Infobytes*. Retrieved from <http://www.calico.org/infobytes>

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