

Reviving reading through interactive digital literature in EFL: a study of students' reading motivation in the Danish lower secondary school

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Abstract

This article presents a recent research project investigating students' and teachers' reading experiences with interactive digital and analogue literary texts in foreign languages within a Danish lower secondary school context. The project has a dual objective: first, to examine teachers' and students' reading habits and motivation for literature, and second, to explore ways of improving reading motivation through various media formats including the crossover of digitalisation and literature. The importance of this study is underscored by previous research indicating a decline in reading interest in Denmark, juxtaposed with the rapid increase in students' consumption of digital media. Taking an empirical stance, this study therefore provides evidence of students' literary reading experiences and motivation in English in a school context.

The research design consists of three parts: 1) a quantitative survey with responses from 60 teachers and 190 students, 2) a didactic intervention featuring exemplary teaching sequences that incorporate literature in interactive digital as well as analogue media format, and 3) a qualitative study based on focus group interviews exploring students' reading experiences across different media. The study shows that students have very different reading preferences and interactive texts are not necessarily the only answer to enhancing students' reading motivation. Drawing upon the study's findings, the article offers recommendations for selecting literary texts to support reading motivation.

Keywords: *digital literature, reading motivation, EFL, foreign language education*

Introduction

Currently the media in Denmark discuss the notion of “hatred of reading” referring to a growing reluctance among children and teenagers to engage with literary texts (see e.g. the series of articles in *Politiken*, 2025). This term encapsulates the challenges faced by educators and parents in fostering reading motivation among children and reflects broader concerns about the decreasing enthusiasm for reading among younger generations. Despite many national and local initiatives that try to foster reading motivation (Lund & Skyggebjerg, 2021), the number of children and teens in Denmark that are not fond of reading is growing. In order to understand reading motivation in an EFL context, this study examines how young students in the Danish lower secondary school experience reading in both analogue and digital formats. Additionally, it explores the demands that a digital foreign language text imposes on students as readers. Conducted in 2022-2023, this dual language study focused on the subjects of English and German as foreign languages at lower secondary school level in Denmark; however, this article addresses findings solely related to English with a particular focus on students’ reading motivation.

Literature Review

While *reading motivation* (often understood as the interest or desire to read texts) may seem straightforward, research in the field reveals that the concept is far more complex, encompassing different perspectives on what drives individuals to engage with reading. A rich array of terminology has emerged to capture the various facets of the phenomenon, including reading engagement (Brozo et al., 2007; Cremin, 2014), pleasure/joy of reading (Clark & Rumbold, 2006), willingness to read, affective aspects of reading etc. (Lund & Skyggebjerg, 2021). In this article, reading motivation and engagement are used synonymously and view the psychological grounding of the term as readers’ state of mind and their driving force in interaction with literary texts.

A recent systematic literature review conducted by Lund & Skyggebjerg (2021) identifies several dominant themes in reading motivation research, including its connection to reading competence, gender differences (with girls generally reading

more frequently), and measurements of reading motivation through questionnaires and surveys. Due to the complexity of reading motivation, these measurement tools may not always provide a complete or accurate picture, for reading motivation is often (mis)understood as the amount of time spent on reading, which is not the same as being motivated to read. Despite the lack of measuring accuracy, several recent studies in Danish as L1 in Denmark highlight the significant decline in children's interest in reading – a general trend apparent both during leisure time and in school settings (Hansen et al., 2017; Hansen et al., 2022). This tendency can also be observed in the general population, both in Denmark and other Nordic countries (Michelsen, 2021).

Children, and especially teenagers, show decreasing motivation to read as their digital media consumption rises (Hansen et al., 2022), suggesting that increased digital media consumption leads many students to engage in what is known as a “hyper-attention” mode rather than a “deep attention” mode needed for immersive reading (Hayles, 2007). Other studies take a positive stance and instead of focusing on students' lack of reading motivation, they concentrate on the variety of media students use to read and conclude that students have very different reading preferences affected by text formats: analogue, audio or digital (Henkel, Pedersen & Poulsen, 2022; Henkel, Mygind & Svendsen, 2022; Henkel, 2023). For instance, in a study that examines reading of Year 8 students in Danish as L1, Henkel (2023) and Henkel, Mygind & Svendsen (2022) distinguish between reading experience, materiality and reading comprehension when using the same text in three different media (analogue book, audiobook and literary app). Their findings highlight the role of multisensory reading in the meaning making process when interacting with literature across the different media.

Building on this, our study further draws insights from Lütge et al. (2019), who explore the intersection of digital media and foreign language literature teaching. They propose the FINaLe model, which provides a framework for understanding the relationship between digital literature and digital literature competences. In attempting to understand the digital reading condition today, several scholars have contributed research across disciplines, addressing and challenging print-biased conceptions of

reading that still dominate the research – regardless of whether the medium is print or digital (Engberg et al., 2023).

While most studies focus on reading in the first language (L1), research on reading motivation in foreign languages remains limited. The present study thus seeks to address this gap by examining reading motivation from a foreign language perspective. To provide some context for our research, the following section explores the Danish language teaching landscape and the current state of digitalisation in Denmark.

The Danish context

Our study concerns 14-year-old learners of EFL in Year 7. Students begin learning English in Year 1 at the age of 7-8 and this means that they are generally at the A2 level of the CEFR. Figure 1 below shows the stages of primary and secondary education in Denmark.

Nursery/Kindergarten/ Pre-school years Aged 0-6	Mandatory comprehensive municipal school Years 0-9, roughly aged 6-16	High school Years 10-12 Roughly aged 18-19
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Figure 1: Danish school context

The situation of digitalisation is assumedly quite different in Denmark from that in many other countries. In recent years, Denmark has seen heavy investments in digitalisation at all levels in society; for instance, 94% of Danes are online daily (Statistics Denmark, 2017). At school, 2.5 billion DKK was invested in municipal schools from 2012 to 2017. All subjects are expected to integrate IT (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet [Ministry of Children and Education], (2020), and this is reflected in the following statistics: Approximately 82% of teachers use digital materials in class (Rambøll, 2018), 72% of students use digital tools in every or almost every class; 30% of learners spend 5-7 hours per day using digital tools for learning activities, and 47% of Danish students use their digital devices more than half of the school day (PISA, 2022).

Many schools never use analogue teaching materials but rely on digital learning platforms designed by publishing houses (Danske Forlag [Danish Publishers], 2023). Most classrooms have interactive whiteboards with internet access. The consequences of this in relation to our project are that students are used to digital teaching materials, and less to analogue books. We stipulated that this digitalisation would change EFL learning and teaching and there may be a potential of using multimodal interactive digital literature to engage students in reading.

Research project design

In the light of the above, our examination of interactive digital literature in EFL therefore centres on student interaction with digital texts and the possible effects on student motivation for reading and thus also the effects on foreign language learning potential in general. However, as the project progressed – and as the findings show – student motivation revealed itself to be more complex than simply a matter of digital or analogue reading preferences. The study covers three main phases as shown in figure 2 below:

Phase 1	Research design Teacher & student surveys Data analysis
Phase 2	Development of teaching materials Didactic intervention & observations
Phase 3	Focus group interviews with students Data analysis Dissemination

Figure 2: Project phases

The study's overall aim and objectives were to strengthen students' reading motivation in EFL classes, to identify potentials for language acquisition and intercultural competence, as well as to formulate criteria for choosing interactive digital

literary texts. The study thus encompassed several research questions, but for the purpose of this article we aim to focus only on answering the following: What factors promote or inhibit students' reading motivation? What is the potential of interactive digital literature in EFL and what might be the consequences of reading digitally compared to analogue reading? What criteria are relevant for teachers when choosing interactive digital literary texts for foreign language teaching?

Our hypothesis was that students' interest in reading could be enhanced if they encountered familiar texts – both in form and content – also known from their spare time activities in digital formats. This included interactive digital narratives and content-rich texts that were relevant to the students' age group and aligned with their interests. Danish teens are likely to meet different multimodal texts outside the classroom context, and they are thus able to decode multiple modalities and performances when they meet these in any form of text. To build on this, we first investigated the relationship between digital literature and the digital literature competences needed to engage in and analyse such texts. For this purpose, the FINaLe model (Lütge et al., 2019) proved a useful tool, illustrating the above-mentioned relationship very well.

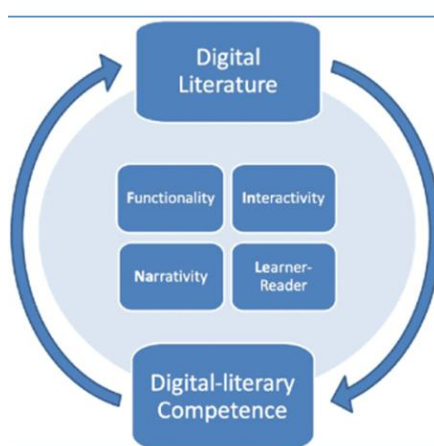


Figure 3: The FINaLe model (Lütge et al., 2019)

The model's four parameters (*Functionality*, *Interactivity*, *Narrativity* and *Learner-Reader*) formed the core of our didactic discussions when evaluating and selecting digital

literary texts for the didactic interventions undertaken in the project. *Functionality* indicates the extent to which digital features can transform the reading experience and the comprehension hereof. *Interactivity* refers to the reader's ability to alter the narrative's content or structure through choices made throughout the reading, while *Narrativity* implies whether the text is linear with a closed ending or open and multi-linear. Finally, the *Learner-Reader* component signals whether the reader remains a peripheral observer outside the world of the text or becomes involved in the narrative, and whether the reader can actively influence the text or only engage in an exploratory manner.

Consequently, we settled on the linear, interactive story *Weirdwood Manor* (Mineker & McGhee, 2020) for our EFL didactic intervention. This digital narrative is a fantasy story about an orphan boy with extraordinary powers who has an adventure in an old castle. Readers can explore the text and, for instance, click on so-called hotspots, collect items and activate games. There are short animated sequences, and the text is also read aloud. The story comes in both a digital version for iPad and an analogue version, which was essential for us to compare students' reading experiences.

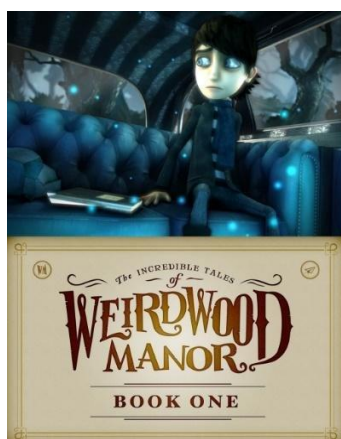


Figure 4: The interactive digital story *Weirdwood Manor* (Mineker, L. & McGhee, D., 2020) used in the intervention

Research data

The methodological framework of the study was a mixed-method approach with quantitative as well as qualitative data. The aim was to gain an insight into the reading habits of language teachers and students. We hypothesised that the teachers' own reading habits and preferences could influence their students' motivation for reading. Likewise, we were interested in the type of media used and reading motivation (or the lack hereof) and how this affects reading preferences regarding digital or analogue texts.

Based on electronic surveys sent to language teachers and students, we developed teaching materials that were implemented in lessons which we observed. The purpose of this type of data was to observe students' interaction and motivation with analogue and digital media. Said data led to focus group interviews with students, where we inquired about their reading experiences and motivation.

Overview of the study's data	
Electronic survey for students	190 lower secondary school students
Electronic survey for teachers	60 teachers in lower secondary school
Intervention	Didactic intervention based on both digital and analogue formats. Teaching materials were developed and tested in a course plan consisting of eight lessons.
Field notes	Observations based on reading motivation, reading experience and reading comprehension. Focal points: concentration, interaction with the text and distractions
Focus group interviews with students	Semi-structured interviews with two groups of students.

Figure 5: Data overview

The study's quantitative data consisted of electronic surveys targeting lower secondary school teachers (60 responses) and students (190 responses). The survey aimed at foreign language teachers included questions focused on literary reading practices in the classroom, as well as the teachers' own interest (or lack thereof) in reading in their spare time. The survey aimed at students included questions about reading preferences regarding text type, language, media, and reasons for reading in different media both at school and in their spare time. Both teacher and student surveys comprised closed and open-ended questions to capture a range of insights through their comments.

The study's didactic intervention consisted of teaching materials based on the students' survey responses and the text's availability in both digital and analogue media. All students read in both media, some starting with the digital version on iPads and others with the analogue version. Other selection criteria for the chosen text not based on the FINaLe model included literary quality, content and genre and language level, as well as the possibility for interacting with the digital text. The teaching sequence developed around *Weirdwood Manor* was based on a communicative, task-based approach with scaffolded pre-, while- and post-reading activities. These included creative approaches to working with literature, for instance: ICT tools like Padlets, BookCreator and Word Clouds were used for both written and oral tasks. Pair and group work took preference to make learners active and to support language acquisition, encouraging students to communicate and negotiate meaning and form. The observations were conducted based on an observation sheet concerning reading motivation, reading experience, and reading comprehension. Particular focal points were signs of concentration, interaction with the text, and distractions/interruptions to see if there were observable differences between analogue and digital reading.

The study's qualitative data consists of two semi-structured interviews with six English students who were selected based on their responses to the survey as well as our observations and teachers' recommendations regarding who could be expected to be willing to engage in a dialogue with us. To obtain as many perspectives as possible, the following criteria were used when selecting students:

- Read literature in their spare time or not (as this could influence motivation)
- Gender (expectations were that boys' and girls' competences and preferences might vary)
- Interesting responses in survey (for instance, reflections on the quality of digital vs. analogue reading)
- Computer use in spare time (with the expectation that gaming could influence the reading process and reading motivation for digital reading)

During these interviews, focus areas were reading experiences, decoding skills, reading speed, engagement, concentration and distraction and materiality as well as motivation to read.

We analysed the data created across all three research phases, including surveys, observations and focus group interviews. First, the surveys were analysed based on the categories created through the survey questions. Then, answers and comments from the open-ended questions were examined and coded. This analysis was inductive and data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The same data-driven approach was applied to the focus group interviews and the observations. The initial codes from across the data set were for example: learning potential, reading identity, materiality, senses, disturbances and well-being. These initial codes were finally condensed into four main themes: Content & genre, Reason for choosing favourite media, Students' perceptions of digital reading, and Well-being & sensory experiences while reading.

Research findings

Overall, our data support recent studies showing that very little literature is being read in EFL classes, and that students are generally unsure about what literature is. The following four themes emerged.

Content & genre

The first theme reveals that content and genre played a more significant role in motivating students to read than whether the medium was digital or analogue. When asked in an interview how the literary text *Weirdwood Manor* differed from other school

texts, many students focused on the content and genre without mentioning the medium at all. They were aware of how content influences their motivation to read: *It's really important... that it's something you're actually interested in... because otherwise I have absolutely no motivation to do schoolwork.*

Some of the students expressed that it did not matter whether they read on iPad or analogue texts, as long as the story was exciting. In particular, students highlighted authenticity of texts (original texts, not simplified and adapted). They expressed a preference for authentic texts with engaging plots as opposed to traditional textbook and platform materials and noted that they would appreciate the opportunity to sometimes select texts themselves. Authenticity and quality of content as well as preferred genre thus hold greater importance for students than the highly visible digital features in a text. This finding resonates with other findings in the context of L1 (such as in Lund & Skyggebjerg, 2021).

Reason for choosing favourite media

The second theme we identified focuses on students' reasons for selecting their favourite medium. Two distinct perspectives emerged here: one emphasising the importance of accurate reading comprehension, and the other prioritising a personal experience with a sense of ownership over the reading process, regardless of the medium. The concept of accurate reading comprehension surfaced during interviews, with some students expressing a strong preference for digital reading, because it supports comprehension through audio and visual aids. As one student put it: *... with digital, it was pretty cool that you could listen to it again... if I didn't... quite catch what they said*, while another shared: *I don't think I would have understood the whole situation if I hadn't seen it in pictures.*

However, some students preferred analogue reading, as they believed it helped improve their reading skills and provided a greater sense of personal engagement. They felt they were reading on their own. An interesting observation was how digital reading could sometimes evoke a sense of shame in some students. As one of them explained: *You feel a bit of shame... if you read digitally, because then you're not learning as much.*

This may reflect the students' self-perception of how they learn and benefit educationally from reading.

Some students focused more on the perception of reading as an individual experience. They preferred to visualise the story themselves and create their own images. According to many of them, this happened best through analogue reading, as one of the students pointed out: *Yeah, then you have a movie in your own head, and you just keep reading... I immerse myself more in the book – I can see it better in my mind.* This sense of reading ownership can be connected to reading identity, which may be diminished when reading digitally. This is how a student voiced this feeling of reading identity loss: *It went a bit faster on the iPad because he sort of read it aloud, but I didn't really feel like I was the one reading.*

Students' perceptions of digital reading

Another theme that emerged in our analysis is how students perceive advantages and disadvantages of digital elements: whether audio, games, and images are seen as distracting, unnecessary, and demotivating, or whether they are recognised as help for reading comprehension and motivation. During observation, we noted that analogue reading was faster; however, this may be due to differences in students' proficiency levels and the games in the digital version, with which students took their time. According to data from the student survey, 64% preferred analogue texts. When interviewed, several students explained that digital elements disrupted their reading process. Some of them revealed this disadvantage like this: *I don't follow along as well as if I were just reading it on paper and I found it a bit confusing because I wasn't reading at the same pace as the audio.* Teachers in the survey also pointed out that screens can be distracting. Our observations, however, indicated that the enthusiasm for digital reading is more prevalent among boys using iPads than among girls. Boys engaged with each other about the games while reading, indicating an interest for a shared reading experience.

Well-being & sensory experiences while reading

The fourth theme we identified revealed a consistent pattern related to well-being and the use of senses. This was particularly evident in the student survey and interviews. We were surprised to see more positive comments about analogue reading compared to digital reading. As mentioned in the beginning, we initially had a hypothesis that the students would prefer digital reading over analogue, given their constant exposure to digital media both in school and in their spare time. This hypothesis did not hold in the intervention.

Students also reported differences in sensory experiences and comfort levels between digital and analogue reading. Some students felt physical discomfort when reading on digital devices. In the student survey, 45 out of 190 respondents indicated eye strain or headaches from screen use, impacting their concentration: *I feel like the words are flying all over the place*, as a student writes, for example.

Many students especially appreciated the physical and tactile qualities of a printed book, which they associated with calmness and coziness. As one student put it, *It's nicest to sit with a book in your hand*. Others enjoyed the act of turning pages. This preference is further echoed in interviews: *I prefer having the book in front of me where I can touch it... and see how far I've come*. The sensation of touch contributed to greater reading motivation: *Now I'm more than halfway through – it's a great feeling*, writes a student, for example, in the survey. However, there were also a few students who mentioned the inconvenience of paper books: *Books are heavy*, some wrote. *They break easily*, and *you can forget them at home*. A few students in the survey also highlighted the impracticality of paper books and their *dry pages*.

Conclusions

Based on the identified themes from our analysis, we conclude the following:

1. Some students read to practise and learn the language, while others read for the content, the experience, and the sense of community around a text.

2. Some students value sound and images to ensure correct understanding, while others prefer to create their own mental images through analogue reading.
3. There is disagreement on whether digital elements such as games, sound, and images support or disrupt the reading process and experience.
4. Some students find great support and motivation in these digital elements, while others experience the opposite.

Regarding the three research questions, we conclude that many students are motivated to read interactive digital texts. Yet, in addition, our study shows that reading motivation is much more complex and e.g. also depends on the students' preferences for genres, authenticity of texts and relevance of literary content. Therefore, digital reading is not necessarily the only answer for reading motivation as many students prefer analogue reading. We thus recommend that language teachers carefully consider the choice of reading texts in class, so these vary and, if possible, are offered in both analogue and digital formats. It is also a good idea to allow students to choose literary texts themselves based on content, genre, and medium.

Seen from an EFL-perspective, we also recognise that some students' reading comprehension is improved by digital multimodal elements. This means there is great potential in using digital literary texts. However, some students find the interactive elements very disturbing physically as well as psychologically, which may influence their reading motivation. As our data show, according to the students both analogue and digital texts can be relevant as long as the students find the content interesting.

The FINaLe model which incorporates the parameters of *functionality*, *interactivity*, *narrativity* and *learner-reader* serves as a useful tool for teachers who consider using interactive digital texts in their classrooms. The model highlights that such texts are more than just online materials – they represent a dynamic combination of these parameters. However, teachers should also ensure that text selection aligns with well-established criteria, including literary quality, content relevance and appropriate language level.

In short, the study identifies the following recommendations for selecting literature to enhance reading motivation:

- Content is more important than the medium
- Age-appropriate content
- Authentic literary texts rather than non-authentic ones
- Appropriate level of difficulty, with support from images and sound as a differentiation option
- Opportunity to create mental images
- Opportunity for free reading with self-selected texts in terms of content, genre, and mediums
- Opportunity for a reading community and a sense of creating “cosiness”

Discussion

The above conclusion is based on both teacher and student voices, as heard in questionnaires, observations, and interviews. Although the project draws on multiple types of data, the results are not necessarily representative of all foreign language contexts. Had we interviewed more students, we might have encountered other perspectives and reached other conclusions.

Despite this limited scope, our study is the first Danish one investigating reading motivation among foreign language students, thus there is little basis for comparison. Yet, research on teenagers’ reading and use of media in general within a Danish as L1 context indicates that students’ reading preferences are complex and diverse regarding genre, media and context with a tendency that students focus on content before choosing media (Henkel, Pedersen & Poulsen 2022). This highly resonates with our findings in an EFL context.

Furthermore, the fact that our project reveals some students find digital literature distracting aligns with the ongoing public debate about the effects of digitalisation. Many teachers and researchers argue that mobile phones and laptops disrupt learning, as students are frequently distracted by digital devices across subjects (PISA, 2022). This growing scepticism toward digital materials and screens is also reflected in recent

recommendations from the Danish Ministry of Children and Education (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet, 2024). Key recommendations include: establishing common guidelines for screen use, limiting digital distractions during school hours as well as balancing analogue and digital teaching materials and methods.

Many teachers in our survey are sceptical about the use of digital devices in English teaching. One teacher, for instance, writes: *Reading on screens is distracting and I know you read better and are more present in a book*. This scepticism resonates with the current pedagogical and political debate and recommendations in Denmark regarding the role of digital devices and materials in school contexts, particularly concerns about student distraction. While digital literary texts can play a role in fostering reading motivation, they are not a standalone solution. To effectively support students' engagement with reading, other approaches must also be considered.

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