From "Light Extensive Reading" to "Pure Extensive Reading"

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Abstract

A unique extensive reading program started in 1993 at one college in Tokyo. The program had numerous roadblocks, big and small, on its way. In 2003, after numerous adjustments and changes, the program evolved to become what could be called, retrospectively speaking, "Light Extensive Reading". Then by 2006, with refinement and modification the program developed to be "Modified Extensive Reading". Now heading towards twenty years, the program is hoped to reach for "Pure Extensive Reading".

Keywords

English Extensive Reading Decline in English Proficiency

Preface

A presentation entitled "Extensive Reading: Ten Years and Counting" given at the 2003 annual JACET Conference held at Tohoku Gakuin University in Sendai, Japan, introduced an extensive reading program and how the program was developed and was evolving at one college in Tokyo. With follow-up surveys, and modifications and supplementations, an intermediate paper of the same title in 2005 further detailed how the program coped with the rules and regulations of an institution, the confining structures of an established school curriculum and the needs of new students with a different backgrounds in English language education.¹

At the inception of the extensive reading program in 1993, not having many existing programs to model, a unique program was innovated that has become one of the core, required courses of the English department. However, when the features of an extensive reading approach which Day and Bamford (1998) considered necessary or ideal, did not or could not fit into the curriculum, it became necessary to adapt to the pre-existing curriculum, or develop something new. Problems concerning the actual methods, materials, assessment, class management, and others as addressed

by Waring (1997), had to be overcome before the program could begin. By 2003, after numerous adjustments and changes, the method was something that could be introduced to others.

Nearly ten years since then, this paper re-introduces the program to others teaching or otherwise connected in some way to extensive reading. An observation-/assessment- and evaluation-based research was conducted for this paper, with the evaluations based on the surveys taken in the classes. Surveys have been taken after each term, for others to share our findings, experiences and the voices of our students as well.²

I. Introduction

I-1 Iseyama Method

The extensive reading course in the English Department of one college in Tokyo was begun in 1993 by Yoshiro Iseyama, a former professor in the department. He was concerned about the slow but steady decline of the English ability of the students entering college. A veteran teacher at both the high school and college levels, he realized the need to incorporate a course into the already established curriculum that would somehow accommodate the needs of the incoming students with less than adequate ability. The students managed to pass the entrance exams with relative scores, so it was worked with the assumption that they could handle the rigors of college English classes. But it was realized that this was not the case. Their weakness in English gradually became apparent; the study skills necessary for college classes in English were lacking. In order to cope with this, extensive reading was incorporated into the curriculum as a required subject for all freshmen.

Using Harold E. Palmer's (1964, 1968) principles for extensive reading, a method specifically for the college was devised by Professor Iseyama, which was fondly referred to as the "Iseyama Method."

I-2 Iseyama Method: how it worked

Anywhere from one hundred to one hundred twenty students enter the English department every year. They were divided into three classes for the extensive reading course based on the scores of the placement test given the day after the entrance ceremony.³ The classes were taught concurrently by three teachers for four weeks, with Professor Iseyama as the coordinator. It was an omnibus system where the three teachers completed all three classes in twelve weeks.

I-3 Iseyama Method: its workload

The basic idea underlying this system was to expose the students to as much English as

possible, as well as to various genres, teachers and teaching methods. With the rotation of teachers in this omnibus system, the students were indeed exposed to materials of three different genres, at the outset—novels, plays and columns—within the first term of their college year. The same routine was repeated in the second term, thus having the students read six different books, plus another book for their summer homework, making a grand total of seven books in one academic year.

Granted, this is far from the number of books most people would associate with extensive reading. However, when we consider the fact that in a typical college reading class, it may take one full academic year to complete one book, we can see the importance of this method.

I-4 Iseyama Method: class management

The classes were taught during the same period on the same day of the week. A luncheon meeting was held every week to consult, review and exchange and share information among the teachers and coordinator, using individual information cards designed for this class. The teachers used seating charts in order to save time to take attendance and make it easier to see who was contributing to the class. This class management has not changed since its outset.

I-5 Iseyama Method: assessment

The teaching styles were different from teacher to teacher. Assessment was crucial to have this course incorporated into the already established curriculum. The scores based on the teachers' criteria for assessment were submitted to the coordinator. In the second term, the scores of the test for the summer assignment were taken into consideration. The final assessments were made on the basis of the average scores of the first and second terms. At times, the coordinator made minor adjustments with the final grades. This assessment procedure has remained more or less the same since the beginning of the course.

I-6 Iseyama Method: its deviation

The Iseyama Method deviates from the traditional extensive reading approach but covers many of the ten characteristics of extensive reading cited by Day and Bamford (1998). Besides the necessary concerns of students and language ability, another major concern was the necessity to conform to institutional regulations. There was the need to be able to "teach" a class, assess and give fair and accurate grades. The "powers that be" were not going to give us the freedom ideally associated with extensive reading. The obvious exceptions to Day and Bamford's characteristics are the students' privilege to the select reading materials and the students' privilege to quit a book

if it does not interest them after beginning the reading. In order to keep this class within the structure of "college classes," the teachers assign the reading materials.

II. Iseyama Method Reaching for Twenty Years: the first stage

II-1 The First Stage: its original purpose and its aim

It is nearly twenty years during which we made changes, minor and major, according to the feedback from the students. These twenty years can be divided into two stages, roughly ten years each. In this section, the changes and decisions made in the first stage will be explained.

This course was incorporated into the curriculum with the prospect that it would not only improve the students' proficiency in English, but also widen their scope of interest, which should facilitate their decision making in junior and senior years when they are required to decide their own special field of study. The following were the three original aims of this extensive course:

- (1) Broadening the students' horizons by exposing them to various materials.
- (2) Enhancing the students' reading ability by the volume of reading.
- (3) Encouraging the students to grasp the general understanding of the material by getting used to reading at a faster pace.

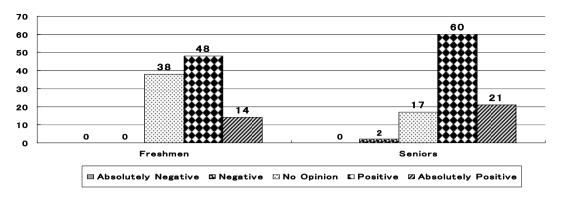
Professor Iseyama believed that the effects of this course with such aims should be verified in later years.

II-2 The First Stage: minor change 1

The original system as explained in 1-2 continued for four years until 1996 without any particular changes. In 1997 the teacher in charge of "Columns" took a sabbatical and so, it was replaced by "Essays". In the following year, "Columns" was reinstated but "Essays" was kept on and so, four genres were covered—novels, plays, essays, and columns. Therefore from 1998 on, the students were divided into four instead of three levels, and as a result the classes were conducted in three-week rotations. So the course covered nine books, eight in the regular classes and one for the summer assignment.

II-3 The First Stage: 2003 survey

In 2003, which marked the tenth year of this course, an overall survey was conducted to get the students' feedback on this course and to revise the system if necessary. There were 472 respondents in all. The questionnaire consisted of fourteen multiple choice questions, most with spaces for written responses. We had positive responses from over 70% of the students in most questions except one, i.e. the benefit of the course.



[Chart 1: course benefits]

As is shown in Chart 1 above, there was a discrepancy between the freshmen and seniors in how they accessed the benefits of the course: while 81% of the seniors found it positive, only 62% of the freshmen found it positive with more than one –third unable to make a decision. This verified Professor Iseyama's belief that the course should serve its purpose in later years.

II-4 The First Stage: minor change 2

As for the preferred genre, there were more invalid responses and more free written comments. Here are some of the comments:

Current English should be included in the reading materials.

More emphasis should be put on practical English.

The "Columns" in the textbooks are dated.

The distinction between "Columns" and "Essays" is not clear.

Considering these voices from the students, in 2004, "Columns" was replaced by "Newspaper Articles". The 2004 survey supported this change in genre, and "Newspaper Articles" was opted top for the preferred genre.

II-5 The First Stage: minor change 3

Although the omnibus system itself was highly evaluated, the students spelled out their complaints in the written form, and those complaints were of a similar kind. From these responses, it was learned that the students found it difficult to accustom themselves to the three-week rotation, which led them to frustration. They complained that the teachers changed too often and that before they got to know one teacher, another one came. Hence, in 2004, a six-week rotation was tried.

However, this was not accepted favourably by the teachers as well as the students. There were complaints from the teachers that they could not revise the class and the material on the basis

of the feedback because they only saw the students for one rotation in the year, either the first term or second term. In addition, now the students were required to read only five books in a year, whereas previously in the three-week rotation they read nine books.

The students, on the other hand, started complaining that six weeks were too short to cover one book. This was due to the fact that they mistook extensive reading for intensive reading. This was possibly because the students were not told what extensive reading really was. One of the principles (Day and Bamford, 1998) of extensive reading, namely No.9, "Teachers orient and guide their students" had been overlooked.

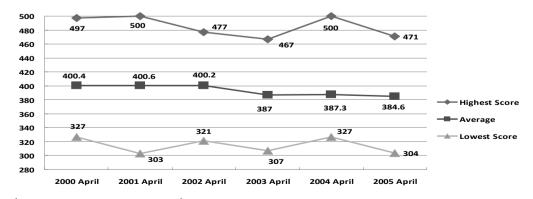
Therefore, at the beginning of the academic year, a full explanation was made as to what extensive reading really was as opposed to intensive reading. In the following year, in 2005, we returned to the former three-week rotation. As a result, the course covered nine books a year as before.

Up until 2005, as mentioned earlier, this course was incorporated in the curriculum as a preparatory step for the junior and senior years. Although there was a decline of the English ability, it was not so great as to make big changes in the system itself. However, from around 2003 on, when the AO (Admissions Office) entrance examintion system was introduced, there was a clear decline of English ability of incoming students and a change of the original purposes had to be considered.

III. Iseyama Method Reaching for Twenty Years: the second stage

III-1 The Second Stage: a major change in vision

We were expecting to conduct another big survey in 2012, heading toward twenty years, however, as expressed in the previous section, we began to feel a noticeable decline in the students' English proficiency. Prior to this, minor adjustments were made to the students' final grades by the coordinating teacher. However, this became more difficult as the number of failing students increased. Therefore, we decided to closely study the statistics.



[Chart 2: placement test scores]

From looking at the placement test scores, there is a clear drop from 2003 and a gradual decline as shown above. The average scores dropped below 400. Also, there was a lack of enthusiasm and class participation from the students. In order to deal with this situation, we made several changes in the course.

III-2 The Second Stage: major change 1

From 2006, another aim was added to the previous three explained in 2-1: that is, to improve basic skills by reading many relatively approachable texts in English.

Due to the decline in student's English ability, the purpose of extensive reading was now to be able to keep up with the class work and pass the class while previously the goal was set at looking ahead in the later years. This was because the number of students in the top group was shrinking and therefore, had made the other groups bottom heavy which in turn lowered the general standard and the average class grades.

III-3 The Second Stage: major change 2

Until 2006, "Novels" consisted of retold stories in an abridged or simplified version. Now, novels as well as collection of short stories were chosen from Graded Readers. As for "plays", in choosing a play, a relatively short play which also has a Japanese translation or has a movie adaptation was taken into account. By doing this, students had other tools to help them understand when reading the play. "Newspaper Articles" were chosen from the Daily Yomiuri, The Japan Times and the Student Times. Two materials were read in each class. One material was read by all groups; the level was targeted to upper middle group. The second material differed for each group. Articles appropriate for each group level were chosen. Up to this point, two classes were conducted in English and two in Japanese. After this alteration, only one class was conducted totally in English.

III-4 The Second Stage: major change 3, moderating Iseyama Method's deviation

As had been always been the case, students had opted "Essays" as the least favorable genre among the four: novels, plays, essays and newspaper articles. So, instead of essays, the SRA reading material was introduced under a unique system. In doing so, deviation from the original extensive method had been eased, and our structured class was brought closer to what is thought to be the ideal extensive reading.

The SRA Reading Level 2C was used in class with a Japanese speaking teaching assistant. Again, the system has been adapted to suit the needs of this course. We used only the Power

Builder reading material in the classroom. The students were divided into ten color groups based on the SRA placement test given on the first day of the extensive reading class. Each color level has fifteen stories in which the student can choose which to read freely. The students are required to read three stories in their color group. After reading the stories, they must complete the questions and tasks for each story. Each student reads three stories within a color level and must get 80% or higher on their scores in order to be promoted to the next color level. Ideally, it was hoped that a student will have read three stories in a ninety-minute class. Besides the reading in the classroom, the students were encouraged to read the Rate Builders outside of class for extra credit. A corner in the departmental library was set up specifically for this purpose and students could go in to reading any time they had free.

III-5 The Second Stage: major change 4

Until 2006, a reading of a full play was given as a required summer assignment. This was to give students a chance to read another play since plays are rarely chosen as textbooks in other English classes. In order to boost students' grades and to decrease the number of failing students, an optional extra summer reading assignment was introduced instead of the required summer assignment. The level of the reading was lower than the regular classroom texts. There was a choice of two readings – plays, novel or both. A fifteen minute open-book test was given at the beginning of the fall semester during lunch time for those who wanted to take this test. The test was to check whether the students had read the book. The books were chosen from Graded Readers Level 1 through 3. The test consisted of roughly twenty-five short answer questions and the score of this test was added to the students' class grade as a bonus.

III-6 The Second Stage: major change 5

Regarding class division, students' placement test scores were used to divide them into four groups: A, B, C and D (A being the highest). Students were not informed of the group levels although they might guess. Until then, each group studied the four genres in a circle order. This is because there was not a big difference between the top and bottom groups and the difficulty of the texts used in each genre were about the same.

At this time, however, Group A began the semester reading a play since it was the most difficult among the four (the other three being Graded Readers, Newspaper Articles and SRA). This is to offer something challenging for the top group. Group D, the lowest class, began the semester with "SRA". The main reason for Group D beginning with "SRA" was that "SRA" was conducted under a particular system with an assistant teacher who spoke Japanese in class.

By being introduced to the SRA system first, students of Group D could have time to become accustomed to the procedure and spend the longest time using the Rate Builders to improve their English reading skills by doing extra work outside of class. They could also ask questions in Japanese to clarify uncertainties. And they approached reading a play last. This was to assume that by then, they had enough experience reading texts in English to tackle a play with confidence. In doing so, we were taking care in dealing with the top and bottom groups. Since the extensive reading schedule is complicated, at the beginning of the semester, we handed out the class rotation order in printed form.

III-7 The Second Stage: concerns

The major changes explained above were conducted from 2006 to ensure that students who try can pass this class and attain credits. However, we still had some concerns. Students who had excessive absences continued to fail the class. Also, some students gave up in a particular genre because they found it too difficult. Some students showed lack of enthusiasm and class preparation. Some students found it hard to keep up even though they made efforts.

As was mentioned previously, the coordinator made minor adjustments to decrease the number of failing students. This was done at the very end, after all grades had been submitted to the coordinator. However, in order to avoid a large number of students with failing grades at the end, each teacher needed to make adjustments in assessing students' grades before submitting them to the coordinator.

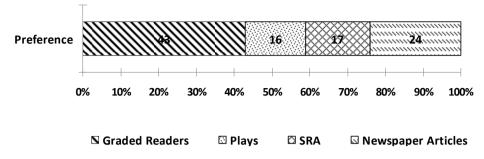
In order to find a way to ease our concerns, we conducted an updated survey in 2006 to get feedback. In the 2006 survey, two questions were altered. Instead of asking the students how much preparation time they spent overall, we asked in which genre they committed themselves the most, and instead of asking them which test form they preferred the most, we asked which genre they felt that they benefited the most. The results revealed a gap between our expectations and the students' response.

IV. Survey 2006

IV-1 Preferred Genre

In 2004, we introduced "Newspaper Articles", the genre requested by the students, and 40% of the students chose the new genre as their favorite as mentioned earlier.

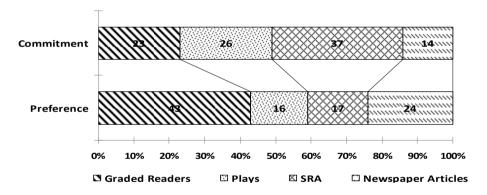
Now in Survey 2006, the newly introduced "Graded Readers" took the first place, as is shown in the chart below. This was, in fact, as expected. On the other hand, we were rather disappointed with "SRA" being the most preferred by only 17% of the students.



[Chart 3: preferred genre]

IV-2 Commitment

However, the response to the newly introduced question exhibited a completely different view. The newly introduced question asked about the students' commitment, in which genre they tried hardest. As is shown below, "SRA" took the first place and "Plays", the least popular, came second. This meant that students' preference said nothing about their commitment.

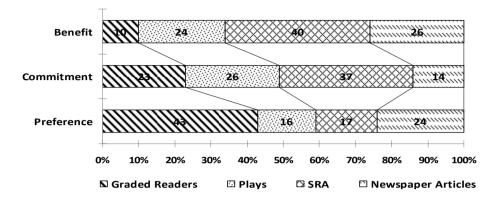


[Chart 4: preferred genre & students' commitment]

The students' written response told us that because play texts were difficult and the workload required for each class, around thirty pages, was so great they had to spend a lot of time on preparation, willingly or not. As for "SRA" which did not require preparation like play texts, commitment in class pushed up the percentage. The students concentrated on their task in order to finish as many stories as possible, without a word, in total silence which is so unusual nowadays. Since "Graded Readers" was fairly easy, not much effort was required. As for "Newspaper Articles", the result was due to its workload, only one or two sheets in class, and one or two sheets to take home.

IV-3 Benefit

Now to our other newly introduced question, the benefit: how they felt about their effort. The gap between our expectation and the students' response was far greater than this commitment result mentioned in the previous section.



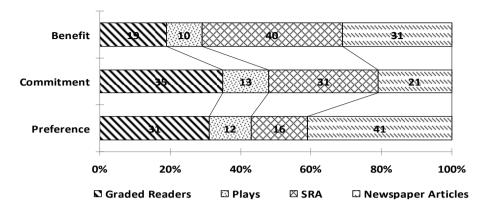
[Chart 5: preferred genre, students' commitment & course benefits (Survey 2006)]

It was as shown above. The overall analysis was that, "Graded Readers" was most popular for the books were fairly easy, as explained before, and because of that, it wasn't necessary to commit themselves as much, and those who spent time on this genre had nothing much to learn in terms of language study, perhaps because preparation did not demand hard work. "Plays", on the other hand, demanded hard work because of its workload, and all those who did commit themselves found it rewarding. As for "SRA", the case must have been similar to "Plays", the difference being that "Plays" demanded hard work at home while "SRA" demanded hard work in class. The explanation for "Newspaper Articles" was given in students' written response. Many students commented that they were pleased and felt proud to read newspapers in English when they rarely read it in Japanese. So the high percentage owes much to this satisfaction than to their acquisition of English language skills.

The unexpected results were rather shocking to us at first, but having analyzed the results, it seemed quite understandable. Of course, it is human nature to opt for the easier. We should have known.

V. Survey 2008

Two years later, survey 2008, revealed a slight change.



[Chart 6: preferred genre, students' commitment & course benefits (Survey 2008)]

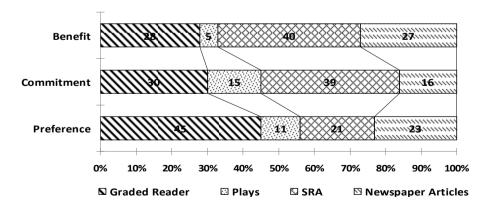
As is shown above, the order of preference had not changed. There was nothing strange in this, for the situation such as workload and demands for each genre remained the same.

However, the results for "Plays" required attention. Those who opted for "Plays" as their most preferred committed themselves most to the same genre. However, only 7% of the students opted it the most beneficial, that is, only half of those who made the effort found it rewarding.

As for "Graded Readers", compared to Survey 2006, commitment went up by 7 points, from 23% to 35%, and the benefit went up 5 points, from 10% to 15%.

VI. Survey 2010

Now let's look at Survey 2010.



[Chart 7: preferred genre, students' commitment & course benefits (Survey 2010)]

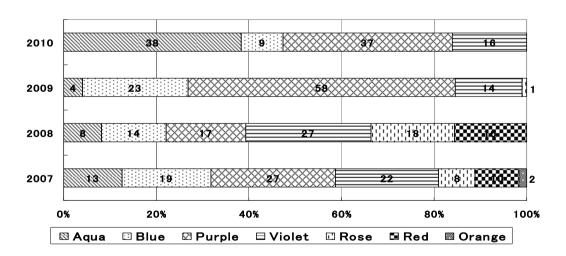
As the chart above shows, "Plays" go down even more. Now, it is by far the least popular. Only 11% percent of the students found it most interesting, and only 5% of the students found it most rewarding, that is only one third of those who made the effort. It must be reminded that four years back, in 2006, about a quarter of the students committed themselves most to this genre, and that a quarter found it the most beneficial. As for "Graded Readers", it must be noted that 30% of the students replied that they committed themselves most in this genre, most of whom found this genre most rewarding.

Now, what do these statistics imply? As for "Plays", it is obvious that the texts were too difficult and the workload too much, and that there are many students who could not, or would not cope with this genre. Sad to say, but maybe it was time to say goodbye to this genre.

On the other hand, the statistics of "Graded Readers" imply that the level is just right for our present students, which means that the students' English ability has yet declined. In addition, it must be mentioned that some students, especially in the lower group, requested the class to be conducted in Japanese.

VII. SRA Starting Level

The drift toward the lamentable reality of the students' proficiency in English can also be detected in "SRA" placement test results.



(Chart 8: SRA placement test results)

The above chart shows the starting level of "SRA". Aqua is the lowest level, blue next, and then purple and so on. Orange is the seventh level and there are three more to go. As the chart shows, we had students starting at various levels in 2007; we even had students starting with an

orange. In 2008, we no longer had an orange starter, but still had quite a few red starters. In 2009, red can no longer be seen, and even rose is barely in view. 2010 clearly shows the bottom heavy structure.

As previously explained, in 2006, we were made to realize that the number of students in the top group was shrinking. Now, we had to acknowledge that there maybe a few good students, but not enough to compose a group.

Something had to be done. It was time for change.

VIII. Time for Change

VIII-1 Time for Change: looking back on the features

Something had to be done. But how? When we consider change, we must look back on features of the course. There were five features we had to consider: Multiple Teachers, Rotation, SRA, Genres, and Comprehension of the Reading Materials.

VIII-2 Time for Change: multiple teachers

First we looked at the omnibus system, which included the different teachers, methods and materials. We had over 60% positive response. Written responses included comments such as students can take up to three weeks of classes, even with teachers or materials they did not like, and that the classes did not get boring. Positive responses for this category increased especially after the students were explained as to what extensive reading was about. So, Multiple Teachers got the OK.

Our next concern was how many teachers.

VIII-3 Time for Change: three-week rotation

We then looked at the three-week rotation. Around one-third of the respondents had no opinions. However, the written responses of the lower level students showed negativity towards "Plays". They preferred to do more "SRA" instead. In contrast, the higher level students showed negativity towards doing more than three weeks of "SRA". They just did not feel it challenging enough to merit any more than three weeks.

However, although the higher-level students claimed that three weeks of "SRA" were enough, the surveys revealed that "SRA" itself is received favorably, which makes us believe that "SRA" stays.

Then, what other genre stays or goes? Survey 2010 revealed that 4% did not understand

anything and gave up on all reading materials. It was not just the disfavored plays but also the preferred "Graded Readers" and "SRA". On the opposite end, 8% stated that they felt absolutely positive toward all the materials. As for the "Newspaper Articles", they were well-received by the students, however, it is not in line with extensive reading. Especially when the students do not even read newspapers in their own language.

IX. Possible Changes

There are questions to be answered. Should we keep the Multiple Teachers?

The answer is YES. How many? Four or three or two? The number of teachers automatically sets the number of rotation weeks. How should we divide the classes? Should they be evenly distributed, bottom- or middle-heavy with only a small number of students in the top level?

Professor David Hill mentioned in his keynote speech at the Extensive Reading First World Congress (2011) that in many cases, teachers end up with two distinct "fed-up" groups in their class: the struggling lower level students and the bored higher level students. That is exactly what we had.

In situations like these, teachers tend to focus their attention on the weaker end and the higher levels students are left to fend for themselves because they are thought to be able do things on their own. However, the 8% we saw must not and cannot be overlooked. What are we to do? The top-level students relish the challenge and have shown that they are not adverse to "Plays". We agree that play scripts is one of the best ways for students to feel culture. With plays, one is reading the spoken language, whereas with stories, you are reading descriptions. But, "Plays" are no longer included as a genre. Until recently, play scripts were available only in the low level graded readers, or in the original full plays. It was either too easy or too difficult. Again, the two distinct "fed-up" groups. Since 2010, however, a Level 6 graded reader in play script form has become available. More should be in the coming. This should satisfy the requests of the higher-level students. We still have the opportunity to expose students to plays in script form.

Looking back on all the years, what we looked upon as a successful program in the earlier years is no longer suitable for this new generation of students. It was not extensive reading in its true sense. In other words, it was what Professor Hill (2011) said in his speech—Light Extensive Reading. And the second stage was possibly Modified Extensive Reading, again to use Professor Hill's terminology. Now, we hope, with all the changes to suit the needs, to reach for Pure Extensive Reading.

Note

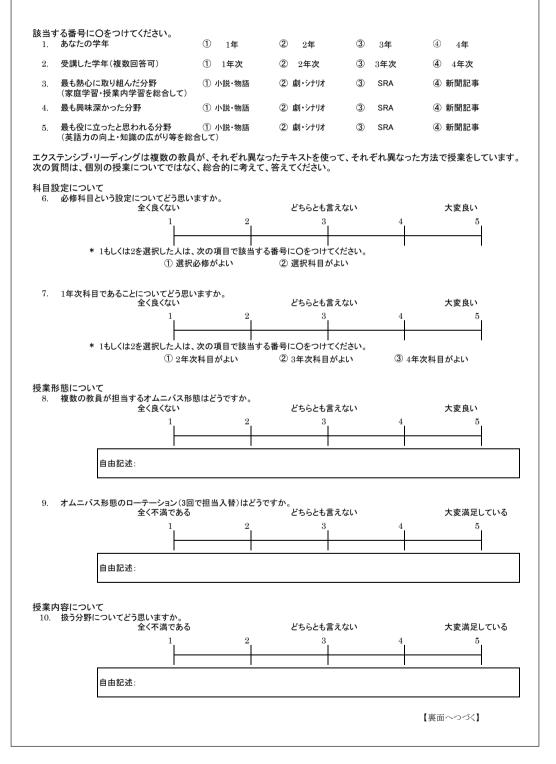
- 1. Kyoko Indo, Ellen Kawaguchi & Jun Matsumura (2005). "Extensive Reading: Ten Years and Counting".
- 2. Indo and Kawaguchi have both been the core organizers of the project from the very start, Indo mainly in charge of the course evaluation analysis and Kawaguchi of the course management. In addition, Indo has been responsible for the "play" genre, and Kawaguchi for the "fiction" genre at the start of the project, and with the introduction of "SRA" took responsibility for that course. As for the survey sheet, see Appendix.
- 3. When the extensive reading program began in 1993, Professor Iseyama made the placement test for the entire freshman class. The original tests were replaced by the pre-TOEFL tests in 2000, and then again in 2011 by the TOEIC test.

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Appendix

エクステンシブ・リーディングに関するアンケート調査



11. テキストの内容はよく理解できましたか。 全く理解できなかった どちらとも言えない 大変よく理解できた 自由記述: 12. テキストの内容に興味が持てましたか。 全く興味が持てなかった どちらとも言えない 大変興味が持てた 自由記述: 学習効果について 13. この科目は役に立ちましたか。 全く役に立たなかった どちらとも言えない 大変役に立った * 4もしくは5を選択した人は、次の項目で該当する番号に〇をつけてください。(複数回答可) ① 英語の力が少し向上した。 ② 英文を読むのが、そうおっくうでなくなった。 ③ 英文を読むのが、少し早くなった。 ④ 大意をつかむことが少し出来るようになった。 ⑤ 自分の好みの分野が何か少しわかった。 ⑥ その他: _ その他 . エクステンシブ・リーディングの授業に関するコメントを書いてください。 よかったと思う点: 改善して欲しいと思う点: その他: * ご協力ありがとうございました。 なお、このアンケートは、今後の授業改善に反映させていただきます。