

# The On-Going Evolution of a Large Extensive Reading Program<sup>†</sup>

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Adoption of the extensive reading approach at the junior high, high school and university levels is rapidly expanding in Japan. Extensive reading at Kyoto Sangyo University is unusual in its size and long history. It is also unusual for being based around a central piece of software, the MoodleReader module. This article seeks to detail recent changes in both the software and the program as a whole, while outlining ongoing related research and review projects.

*Keywords:* Extensive reading, MoodleReader, English study methods

## 1. Introduction

I love extensive reading!! I love reading but all I read in English last year (in high school) wasn't really interesting. It wasn't story and I had lots of words I didn't know, so I didn't like the way (it was taught). But the extensive reading books are really interesting and I can finish reading most books within 1 hour and there is a goal. I can have fun reading! (Weekly Learning Diary entry by first year English Major student, 2010)

Extensive reading has become “recognized as one of four styles or ways of reading, the other three being skimming, scanning, and intensive reading.” (Day & Bamford, 1998) (p.6) By being novel/non-fiction/reader based, it provides a different approach to that which most Japanese students have experienced in the teaching of English, and, as the above quote shows, student response can be very positive.

Not only is it a method of reading instruction, it is also “intended to develop good reading habits, to build up knowledge of vocabulary and structure, and to encourage a liking for reading.” (Day & Bamford, 1998) (p.6) It provides additional benefits such as the fact that, “Longer concentrated periods of silent reading... enhance background knowledge, improve comprehension skills, and promote confidence and motivation.” (Grabe, 1991) (p.396)

Kyoto Sangyo University has three separate extensive

reading programs in place – one for English majors and International Relations majors in the Faculty of Foreign Languages<sup>1)</sup>, one for students in the Faculty of Cultural Studies, and one for the General Studies English program. While the content and extent of the programs vary, almost every first year student on campus is taking part, irrespective of faculty or department, and all programs share the same testing and tracking software, MoodleReader.

Extensive reading at Kyoto Sangyo all began with the English majors in the Faculty of Foreign Languages. In an article titled, ‘Extensive Reading at Kyoto Sangyo University: An Examination of an Evolving and Growing Program’ in the Kyoto Sangyo University Teaching Profession Research Bulletin last year, Clafin (2010) outlined the background, resources and facilities, and current practice at that time, focusing primarily on the Foreign Language Faculty English Department program.

Since then, the program has developed in a large number of ways, while research projects into various aspects of the program and student attitudes have begun to yield often surprising and interesting results. The purpose of this article is to outline the current developments and concerns with the core software, MoodleReader, and the changes and developments in process in the program and their rationale. The article will also present a basic outline of the range of ongoing formal research projects and less formal review

projects (usually in the form of student interviews and questionnaires) that examine students' reading ability, perceptions of the program and its effectiveness. Due to the limitations of space and nature of this paper, the literature review relating to each of the research projects will not be provided.

## 2. The Core – the MoodleReader Module

The MoodleReader software module provides an interface to track student reading with simple tests written to test basic recall of the story rather than comprehension of any complex ideas or concepts in the message of the author. It was initially developed to meet the needs of the extensive reading program for the English majors in the Faculty of Foreign Languages as mentioned earlier. In the module, students work their way up through levels of graded readers from a wide range of publishers. Each time they pass a test, they get a picture of the front cover of the book added to their top page. The simple design of the teacher interface means close attention to students' individual level and motivational needs is possible. Class comparison functions mean that simple overall tracking and competition can be encouraged.

One of the unusual facets of Kyoto Sangyo's extensive reading program is that the courses that MoodleReader was designed to be used in were not purely reading courses – one was four skills, the other content-based. In addition, most of the teachers were part-time, and thus had very limited time outside of class or training in the approach. This means that the extensive reading component had to be an outside-class activity for students that was relatively easy to manage, but that could effectively encourage students to actually do the reading. The success of this led to a one-semester trial in other departments, followed by the expansion of extensive reading to all first years in the university through the General Education English classes (with around 3,000 students and 60 teachers) at the start of the 2009 academic year. While there have been teething troubles in such a rapid expansion, there have also been a range of very positive developments including increasing cooperation from the library and a wide range of feedback from both teachers and students in how to improve the program.

In the last year, in response to this student and teacher feedback as well as program needs, there have been a range of significant changes in MoodleReader. The most significant

of these was the shift from tracking the number of books read to tracking the number of words read. The primary reason for this shift was that in using a number of books as a goal, it was found that students in the lower levels were not really spending much time reading, while those at the top were struggling to find enough time to read their significantly longer texts. As a result, teachers of the highest levels found students unwilling to progress beyond a certain level as the length of the books made reading them in the required time untenable in the students' eyes. It was felt that a shift to number of words with differing word count goals for differing levels would provide a way to encourage more even and appropriate workloads amongst students and to encourage higher level students to try higher level materials.

In addition to this change, there have been a wide range of additional functions added to the teacher access menu in the software to increase the flexibility and potential of the program for teachers as well as to what students can do and see. Perhaps the more significant of these are that teachers can now compare how their class is going with reading averages in other classes, teachers having the option of checking boxes on lists of what students have read in order to check for reports received, and also teachers will soon be able to award not just extra words in rounded packages (500, 1000, 2000, 4000 etc), but also by book title with the appropriate book cover and exact word count appearing on the student menu. From the student point of view, there is a new 'View Books' function which allows students to see the word count and average student ratings of books by level, publisher or genre.

One further development has been the fact that the large number of domestic and international presentations made by Kyoto Sangyo academic staff relating to MoodleReader have led to it being adopted by a growing number of schools and universities around the world. The original reason for making it open and free was the desire for help in writing and developing quizzes, and this is finally bearing fruit. The Extensive Reading Foundation has also been considering adopting the program as one of the pillars in its ongoing efforts to encourage the widespread adoption of and support for extensive reading by educational institutions around the world.

## 2.1. Concerns and problems related to the use of MoodleReader

While it is felt that the developments and changes in approach and functions outlined above have been successful, several problems have come to light. The first and largest was the severe lack of books. Current library restrictions dictated by the limited number of books mean that students can only borrow one book at a time, and the settings in MoodleReader only allow students to take a quiz every two or three days (depending on student major) at the maximum. This has meant that students, in particular lower level ones who have to read a much larger number of books, were struggling to find books on the shelves at their levels, in particular at the start of the year. At the same time, higher level students have, as hoped, begun reading higher level books, and it has been found that the selection of books at higher levels is limited and inhibits student choice. This has led to complaints about the lack of choice in genre and book titles from students.

Another significant obstacle to program effectiveness was that the new functions outlined above are currently only on the version of MoodleReader being used by the Faculty of Foreign Languages due to the unwillingness of the university computer center to install software updates that they fear may be unstable. Subsequently, students in General Education have been complaining about the lack of access to word counts that is provided by the new View Books function. As MoodleReader has been made openly available to other universities, this means we are in the ironic situation in which our competitors all have access to the better and later Sangyo-produced software while the majority of our students operate on an older version<sup>2)</sup>.

A final concern relates to the workload in the management of this openly available software. The rapid expansion of the program within Sangyo, combined with its expansion into many schools and universities around the world entails an enormous amount of hours of work in ongoing maintenance and development primarily by the original creator of the module, Tom Robb. Complicating this workload is the fact that as extensive reading is grade related, students expect it to be perfect. It is hard to get students to understand that MoodleReader is like freeware, with software development and quiz writing being done almost on a voluntary basis. This means that there are bound to be errors and weaknesses compared with professional level software which comes with

overall quality assurance.

## 2.2. The Quest for Solutions: Changes in the Setting

A range of steps are being taken to combat these concerns. The largest problem was seen to be the lack of numbers of books in the library for the program. In a series of meetings with senior library staff, it was found that the library has seen very significant increases in reserved section use and a washback effect in overall library use. Consequently, the library has opened up more shelf space and provided significantly more funds to purchase books. New books added have included a range of types and genre including some non-fiction readers and a series of early chapter books for native speaker children called Step into Reading. Promises have also been made for the future that entail an almost doubling of reserved section space for extensive reading books. The bottleneck now is the need to make tests.

The application to develop the university Language Laboratory area into a full-blown self-access center, which was hoped would provide a second location for books, was denied, and so, to try to further alleviate pressure on the limited numbers of books in the library and to provide a wider range of reading materials to students, various budgets were used to purchase a range of readers and a new small student-accessible space was created. Over the year, a wide selection of native speaker children's picture books, chapter books, short novels, manga and graphic novels were added to create a base for students to look at and evaluate possible new books for the program, and to encourage students to read outside the program and to become readers, if not for life, then at least while at university. The selection of books in the LL has also had the positive effect of making the books more accessible to part-time teachers, and has led to many very constructive suggestions for program improvement.

To combat the quality of tests issue, in the past year there has been ongoing reviewing of individual quiz quality primarily by a team of contract teachers teaching general education classes. They have found and solved many problems and typing errors in quizzes, thus increasing overall quality. This team is not only in charge of checking the tests, but is also in charge of supporting other teachers in understanding and implementing the program in their classes.

Developments have not been limited to students and teachers only. Staff understanding and cooperation has been

encouraged through the creation of a class for university office and library staff to trial and experience the MoodleReader. Individual staff have also shown interest and, in several cases, spent considerable time reading to improve their own English levels. One encouraging development has been that those staff involved have started giving students advice and are helping in the creation of a range of pamphlets to explain the benefits of and on-campus resources for extensive reading to students and staff alike.

### 3. Current Research to Improve and Reflect on the Program

The Extensive Reading program at Sangyo is unusual in its size, and so there are few examples to follow. This means that there are many areas that need constant monitoring, and that there are also many opportunities for exciting new research. The focus of this section is to outline a range of ongoing research projects that look at student beliefs, reactions and progress. The results of these are vital, not only for research into the effectiveness of the extensive reading approach, but also in making the program reasonable, in terms of workload to the students, and accountable, in terms of improvements in student ability and use of university funds and teacher time.

#### 3.1. Student reading speeds and comprehension

While there appears to be a widespread belief that reading speed is important and is improved by Extensive Reading, and that a decent reading speed aids student comprehension of the text, there is surprisingly little published research on actual student reading speeds. As the university requires teachers to set a certain amount of homework for classes each week, it is vital that we know how fast students are reading and what they are able to handle, both from an academic point of view, as well as from a program point of view.

The first large examination of student reading speed was

held in class towards the end of the last academic year for 75 English major students at the end of their first year, and 61 at the end of their second year. It was felt that the normal length of reading tests often seen online or in speed reading books of around 500 words was insufficient in length to see how fast students were really reading. In addition, it was felt important that students use a whole story, not a fragment, and so a short story from a Cambridge Reader 2,247 words long was used. Unfortunately, while teachers were given instructions on how to handle the test, there were significant differences in how individual teachers carried it out, which raised questions as to the overall validity of the test.

This was then followed up by a more rigorously conducted test in April of this academic year. All 112 English major first years were given a test of their reading speed during the orientation week before classes started. All students were tested at the same time in the same room under carefully controlled circumstances. This provided valid results and, once a follow-up reading test is conducted at the end of the academic year (scheduled for the last day of classes), it will be written up into a more formal research paper.

In considering the data, students were divided into three groups – the top third were labeled faster readers, the middle third average readers, and the bottom third slower readers. The tentative results of the above research projects measured in words per minute are shown in table 1 below.

While the students doing these tests were different students each time and the circumstances of the tests were not always as reliable as could be hoped, it was felt the figures did provide a basic measure for how much time students were taking to read, and thus gave us a ‘working model’ of student reading speeds to attempt to set appropriate reading homework amounts.

Findings included the fact that the average at the start of first year was 92 words per minute, a figure much lower than what the researchers had imagined would be the case. What

Table 1. Student reading speeds and comprehension

<i>Start of 1<sup>st</sup> year</i>	<i>End of 1<sup>st</sup> year</i>	<i>End of 2<sup>nd</sup> year</i>
Faster 119	Faster 140	Faster 150
Average 88	Average 110	Average 125
Slower 70	Slower 90	Slower 95

was particularly alarming was that more than 10% of these English major students, 13 out of 112, measured a reading speed of 65 words per minute or less. The top level class in the same test, which includes several students who have studied for significant periods overseas, were found to be reading between 100 and 131 words per minute – again, significantly less than the researchers had originally envisioned. At the present time, it is unknown what impact these reading times have on student ability to follow the overall story. It is hoped that the comprehension tests from April and at the end of the academic year will shed some light on this.

### 3.2. Student reading habits, practices, beliefs and reactions

A pilot survey of 97 students was also carried out to examine student reading habits and practices. This pilot has provided useful feedback for the construction of a survey that will be given to all English major students at the end of this academic year, at the same time as the follow-up reading speed test. However, here are some of the more pertinent and interesting student responses from the pilot:

- How often do you read English outside of school for homework?
- 22% everyday, 63% once or twice a week, 10% once or twice a month, 5% never or almost never.
- Where do you usually take the quizzes?
- 73% at home, 16% in the library, 8% in a CALL room on campus, 3% other locations.
- Do you think it is a good or bad idea to take quizzes on the computer?
- Good 63%, Bad 37%
- How much do you enjoy reading?
- 2% enjoy it very much, 28% enjoy it, 52% a bit, and 18% not at all.
- Has your English improved or not improved because of ER?
- 70% improved, 30% not improved.

Thus, it could be argued that the survey shows that the program is working in terms of its goals. The percentages of students reading regularly and doing tests at home mean that they are developing a reading habit. A majority of students seem to feel the computer quizzes are a valid way to measure

student progress, and, most importantly, despite an initial apparent lack of enthusiasm for reading, students seem to feel the program is beneficial to their English level. Quotations taken from subsequent letters second year students wrote to prospective first year students seem to support this conclusion:

- At that time (the beginning of first year) I started the reading, it was just a hard task for me. However, gradually I got used to reading, my reading speed became fast and I became able to understand the story clearly. You may think it is a horrible thing, but you shouldn't give up and should keep reading. (Second year advising prospective first year)
- The reasons why eibei does this are to keep your reading skill up and make you interest in English books. This reading program make your Intensive class much easier. I'm sure it will help you... Also, you should read books that interest you. If you read books you like, you won't be tired of reading. You will become to like reading. (Second year advising prospective first year)

Students' comments also show they have a decent grasp of the methodology and reasoning behind the extensive reading approach, as well as an appreciation of the shortfalls in reading fluency of the education system they have gone through. Not only that, they seem to realize the benefits of the approach outside the improvement in reading skills, as the following quotes illustrate:

- (Extensive reading) is a good opportunity for you to read books in English. I guess a lot of Japanese students never read them. It is really nice for studying English. You just need to read books, take quizzes and write summaries... It is hard to read books in English first, but you will be good at reading and enjoy it. You can find some interesting books and share information about them with your friends. (Second year advising prospective first year)
- This program is really helpful to improve your English which are writing, speaking and also you can grow your knowledges of English words. Moreover, you'll enjoy English books because you can decide which book is really fits yourself, thus if you think it's not interesting, surely you don't have to keep reading it. (Second year advising prospective first year)
- I will tell you why we have an Extensive Reading

Program. We don't read very difficult books. It means that we have to read many easy books. Reading easy books make us improve our rapid reading skill. What is more, we take quizzes to know how much story we could understand. If you pass the quizzes, you get confidences! You also write reports like summary each book. It improves our English writing skills, too. Extensive Reading Program is good way of learning English for us. (Second year advising prospective first year)

As the survey and later student comments show, students are not enjoying the reading at first, which means that the enforced regular reading MoodleReader encourages is a valid approach, especially at the beginning of first year. Students by the second year of the program seem to understand the aims of the program and extensive reading in general, and feel the program is effective, as the following quote sums up quite effectively:

- (Extensive reading) is simple program. You don't have to worry about it, because you read easy English. You can read without dictionary and you don't spend much time. The higher your reading skills grow up, the higher your book's level become. Your skill grow up spontaneous.
- At first, you will not enjoy reading. You will not make time well, but you will be able to feel your English level grow up. Even if you won't, the result would tell it. Please keep reading and have a good time to read. I hope you read many book with fun. (Second year advising prospective first year)

### 3.3. Current extensive reading related developments

Teachers across the curriculum have come to be very strong supporters of Kyoto Sangyo's extensive reading program. Some teachers have even begun using MoodleReader at other schools they teach at. We have a wide range of books and the numbers of titles is always increasing. However, the English department sees this as only the beginning. There are a range of ongoing developments of the potential of this foundation which the program makes possible.

The most important current project is building a bridge from English learner readers to native speaker literature. Comments by second year students reviewing early chapter books for native speakers show a desire from students for

more lexical challenge and different types of books from the readers. One student reviewing 'Ghost Hunters and the Incredibly Revolting Ghost!' said the book would be good for the extensive reading program "Because it includes many difficult words and phrases so it's very nice for high class students to study. I think reading this book is better than Extensive Reading. In Extensive Reading, there is few slang but in this book, there are many slangs so I could learn many slang." Another student, in reviewing a similar chapter book, *The Time Warp Trio Number 1*, said, "I think extensive reading books in the library are similar, so I enjoyed reading this kind of book. Also reading this book, I felt extensive reading books are easy." To meet this need, we are working to put a range of reading material written for native speakers, from basal readers to chapter books and novels for young readers, into all levels of the program.

From a curriculum point of view, a lecture course in children's literature will be beginning next year. The course will be for 2nd to 4th year students and will endeavor to give students a background in not only picture books, but also how native speakers learn to read and the range of materials used in schools in English-speaking countries. This will hopefully help student understanding of the materials in the program and their potential. A new tenure track American Literature lecturer has also been hired, and he will be providing lecture courses in English on various aspects of American Literature.

In the English intensive courses, the first year extensive reading goal is to encourage students to develop a reading habit and slowly build up their level. In the second year, the goal is to continue that, but also to gradually introduce a range of genre and material to give students an understanding of what is on campus and how and what they might read after the extensive reading program finishes at the end of second year. In the second year, teachers are setting native speaker novels and creating reading groups, encouraging outside MoodleReader reading using material in the LL area and giving extra points, requiring students listen to CDs for readers while reading, setting essays and reports on reflection on and recommendations for the extensive reading program and recommending a wide range of new books for the program. The second year teachers are our longest standing team teaching extensive reading, and the group includes an ex-professional librarian, an ex-elementary school teacher

and an ex-international school teacher. Many of the ideas for the development of MoodleReader have come from them and the following year looks to be one of innovation.

#### 4. Conclusion

Most of the current developments and research into the extensive reading program at Kyoto Sangyo University have been aimed at improving student access, teacher tools, and numbers and ranges of books available. There has also been ongoing work to make the review process an automatic and integral part of the overall curriculum, as well as to expand on the potential having such a program creates.

Tests of student reading speed and comprehension will continue during orientation week for first years, at the end of first year and at the end of second year. At the same time, questionnaires relating to student attitudes, habits and beliefs as well as obtaining student feedback will continue.

The extensive reading approach provides a much-needed focus on reading fluency and practical use of reading skills previously lacking in the Japanese system of English education. The MoodleReader Module has proved itself to be a good solid base for extensive reading. The in-class and curriculum-wide possibilities, opportunities and possibilities it looks like providing, could make the next few years exciting and fruitful both for reading research, as well as student skills and development.

#### Notes

1) The International Relations department students and English department students have the same basic English curriculum and take part in the same extensive reading program with the same software.

2) There are concerns about this as some of the schools using MoodleReader include close rivals of Kyoto Sangyo University. Kyoto Sangyo is a private university, and thus a private company competing for an ever-decreasing number of students in Japan. At the same time, this program is the result of academic research and has been supported by Kakken grants, and so it can also be argued that it should be openly available.

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#### 和文抄録

英語多読学習方法は日本の中学校、高等学校と大学レベルでは急速に広がっています。京都産業大学の英語多読プログラムは他大学に比べ歴史が長く長期間に渡っています。一つのソフト、MoodleReaderモジュール、をベースしているのも比較的珍しいです。本稿ではこの多読プログラム・ソフトの進化と、これに対する研究及び新計画についてを述べます。

キーワード: 多読, MoodleReader, 英語学習方法

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†クラブリン マッシュー\*・ヒーリ サンドラ\*・ソープ チャーリー リンデン\*\*: 多大なる多読プログラムの継続進化

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