

# The LLL SIG Newsletter

*The LLL-SIG Forum at JALT 2012 in Hamamatsu, on October 13<sup>th</sup> of this year, was on the theme “Reading for life: The making of lifelong readers.” This is a report on one segment of that forum, presented by Joseph Dias, Gregory Strong, and Todd Rucynski. Joseph Dias and Gregory Strong, professors in the English Department at Aoyama Gakuin University, are co-coordinators of its Integrated English Program. Todd Rucynski is an Associate Professor at Tokai University and an educational filmmaker with his own company, Fluent Films.*

## **Promoting lifelong readers through a teacher-produced video**

Joseph Dias

This presentation reported on the process of creating a DVD, which was made as a faculty development project to promote effective reading instruction by Aoyama Gakuin University’s English Department. The groundwork for the DVD-making project began one year before the actual filming. Gregory Strong and Joseph Dias were asked to join a committee to investigate how reading was being taught in two required reading courses for freshmen and sophomores. Somehow, the courses became identified as a weak link in the program and we (along with Peter Robinson, Mitsue Allen-Tamai and four others) were tasked with trying to improve the delivery of instruction.

All the courses were taught by Japanese instructors and fell outside the purview of the Integrated English Program (IEP) that Gregory Strong and I oversee. We knew how reading is handled in the IEP; students read novels, which may be in the form of graded readers, and report on them in both oral and written reports. They also read a variety of other genres, including magazine and newspaper articles, with the aim of communicating about them through English, rather than by decoding grammatical structures. A commercial textbook is used for intensive reading, the introduction of skimming and scanning, and to encourage vocabulary acquisition skills. In the case of the reading courses we were called upon to “fix,” none of us quite knew what teaching methodology or approach was being used.

The only evidence that existed about how the courses were taught was a list of the textbooks that each teacher had assigned to his or her students. They ranged from collections of newspaper articles to novels and anthologies of short stories.

The committee speculated that the reading teachers took a grammar-translation approach, offering little participation from students beyond calling upon them to translate or summarize, in Japanese, passages that were read aloud in class. Realizing that it was unfair to paint a picture of how these classes were undertaken in such large strokes, we decided to systematically investigate—through a combination of surveys and class observations—the methods used and how both teachers and students conceived of the course and what they considered to be its strengths and weaknesses.

The results of these inquiries led to a set of recommendations, including a formal proposal for the funding of a faculty development project to promote what were identified as effective reading pedagogy through the production of a DVD featuring ourselves and selected teachers introducing a wide variety of approaches to the teaching of reading, from low-tech methods such as poster presentations and systems to encourage extensive reading, to high-tech techniques utilizing flashcard apps for vocabulary study and CALL.

Before presenting the process of how the DVD was organized and created, we will summarize the results of the surveys that led up to it, which pointed to the advantageousness of facilitating the exchange of effective teaching practices among the reading teachers and between IEP teachers and reading teachers.

The full results of the surveys were reported at the Pan-SIG Conference in Matsumoto last year (Dias & Strong, 2011). What was known about the courses before the survey's administration was that all but one of the 18 reading classes was taught by 15 PT Japanese instructors and 1 FT Japanese faculty member; nearly half of the Reading teachers were veterans, having taught these courses for 8 years or more; the course goals seemed vaguely defined and there were very different assignments and expectations for each teacher's class; and classes were large—45 students, representing a wide range of ability levels, including returnees who were advanced in English ability but weak in Japanese reading skills.

We found, through a series of surveys of nearly 400 students and approximately 30 teachers, that...

- Although reading is often regarded as our students' strongest skill, 80% were either not at all confident about their reading ability or only a bit confident.
- Fifty-three percent liked reading in English and 72% in Japanese; 39% liked

reading in both languages, and 15% did not like reading in either language.

- When reading in English, more than 75% spend less than an hour per week on pleasure reading, with about 52% of them spending less than 30 minutes.
- As expected, the primary class activity involved the recitation of translations (see Fig. 1).

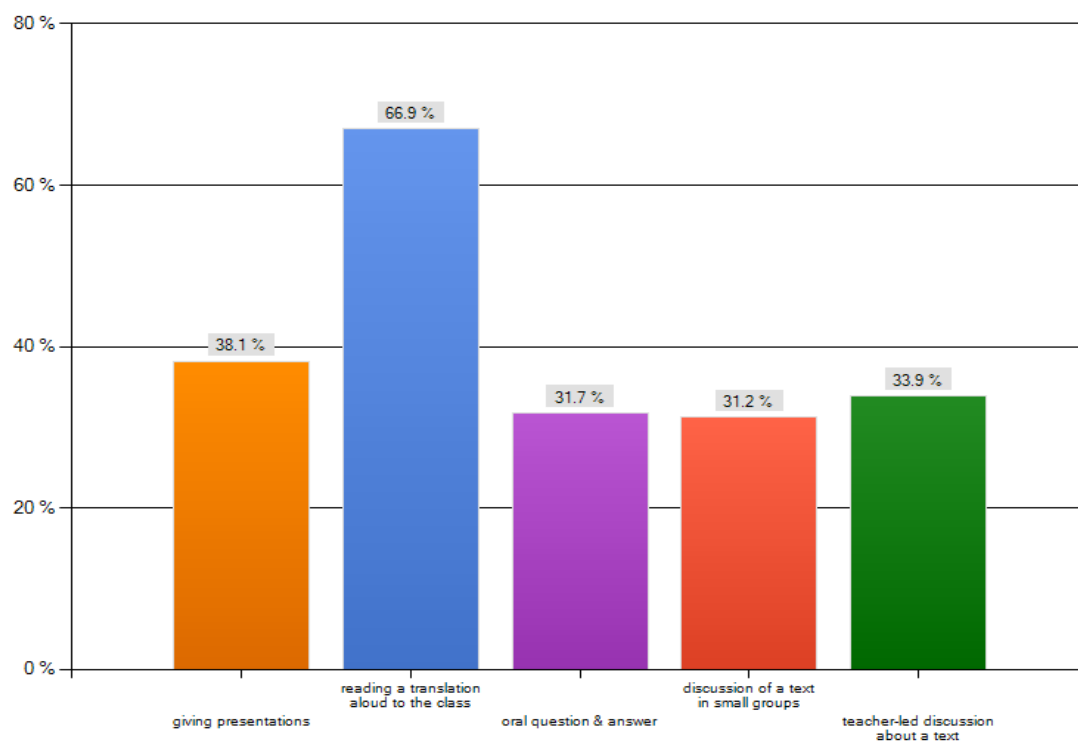


Figure 1: Activities and tasks that student reported doing in their reading classes.

- Over half of the students are doing more than 35% of their reading online—both in English and in Japanese.
- Students were far more experienced and adept than their teachers at using mobile technology for reading (see Fig. 2).
- Sixty-six percent of the students (or more) were doing a substantial amount of reading of blogs, email, and social networking content in Japanese, but they were only about half as likely to be accessing such content in English, representing a great deal of untapped potential to exploit what are clearly highly motivating modes of communication.

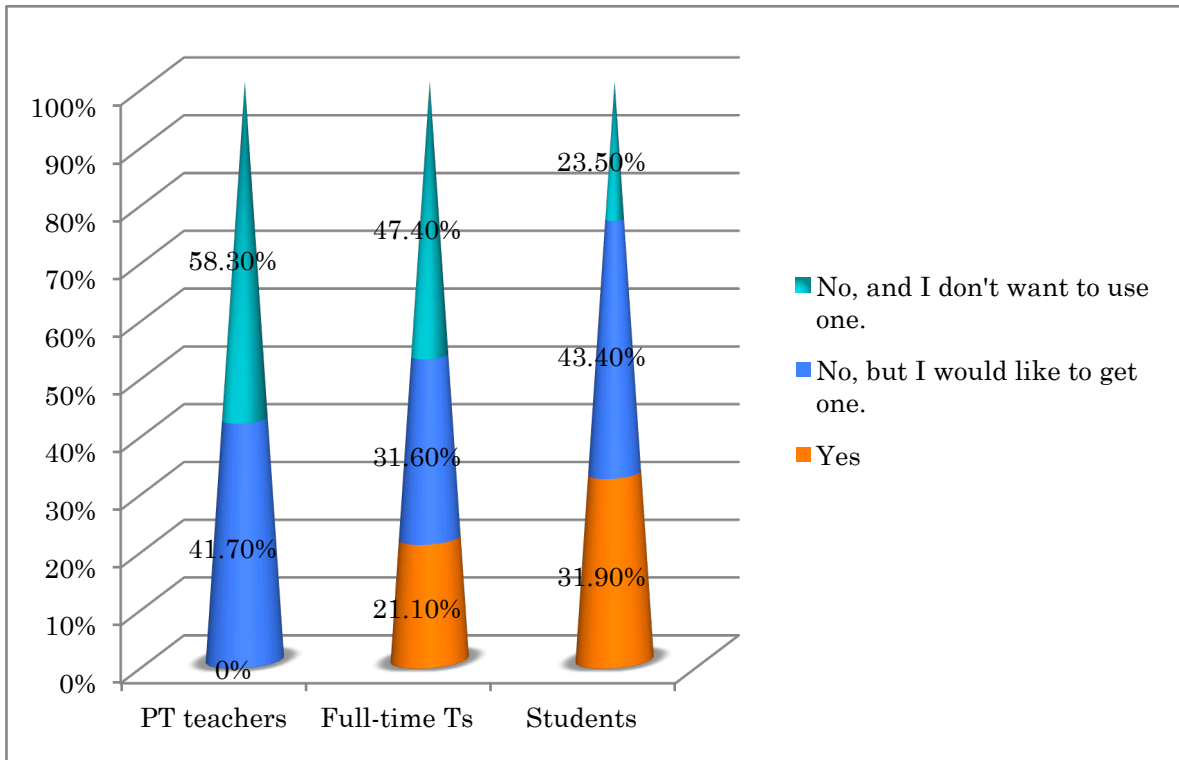


Figure 2: Percentages of all respondents who say they use some type of mobile device (e.g., iPad, e-book reader, etc.) for reading e-books, long documents, or PDFs.

When asked how much their *reading course*, in particular, helped them, a range of positive and negative opinions were expressed:

#### Positive or neutral comments

I can change my way of reading.

It taught me how to read newspaper articles.

I could read “real” English.

It maintains my English at a certain level.

We can know answers of others.

### **Negative comments**

The class is too quiet.

Translates into Japanese every time for everything.

The teacher's voice is not clear so that I cannot understand what (s)he said.

We just translate the texts, which is boring and not helpful.

There were mixed reactions to the reading courses, with some students finding them beneficial in that they could be exposed to English texts intended for native speakers, learn some reading skills, and exchange answers with classmates; while others felt that translation was overemphasized and classes lacked dynamism. Students went on to reveal that they felt the following factors posed the greatest difficulties when reading in English:

- Vocabulary (79 out of 170 respondents mentioned this)
- Grammar / Long sentences / Slang and idioms / Slow reading speed
- Lack of sufficient background knowledge (e.g., “Historical or scientific articles I'm not familiar with.”)

The general picture that emerged through the surveys was one of a fairly traditional grammar-translation approach to reading, tempered by methods exercised by some of the teachers which students responded to more favorably. Through a subsequent survey of the reading teachers themselves, we were able to identify those who demonstrated a variety of techniques and resource use that seemed more in line with current “good practice” (Ellis, 2005; Nation, 2001; Strong, 2010; and Willis & Willis, 1997). Here is a partial list of some of the positive practices that several teachers were already employing:

- Explain, in English, special or difficult words in the text (using information from the internet and reference books).
- Create a family tree of the characters in a story.
- Show the passage of time in a story using a flow chart.
- Use study guides in English and give concise information about the background of reading texts.
- Demonstrate how to use dictionaries—English-Japanese and English-English, including O.E.D.

These findings led us to the next stage of our investigation, which involved seeking permission to observe selected reading classes. All the teachers who were approached welcomed the opportunity to be observed since it was framed as something we were doing in order to identify practices that we hoped other teachers in the program could learn from. In other words, the aim was to “spread the wealth.” In the course of the observations, it was possible to recruit three of the reading teachers for the reading DVD project as they were using methods or techniques we hoped might be adopted by other teachers in the program. As “insiders,” already teaching these courses, we also felt that they might be the most persuasive in convincing some of their colleagues to introduce new approaches to their teaching.

1. A Rationale for New Ways of Teaching Reading (Joseph Dias)
2. Vocabulary Teaching and Testing (Gregory Strong)
3. Vocabulary Learning Apps for Cellphones (Arno Fuhlendorf)
4. Extensive Reading through Graded Readers (Gregory Strong)
5. Teaching Literary Terms for Graded Readers (Vivien Cohen)
6. Tasks Related to Stories: Katherine Mansfield’s “The Fly” (Rieko Okuno)
7. Students Re-telling Stories (Mitsue Tamai-Allen)
8. Interactive Tasks (Gregory Strong)
9. Online Interactive Tasks: Randomizing pairwork with CALL (Yoshiho Satake)
10. From Passive to Active Readers (Kazuko Namba)
11. Jigsaw Reading (Joseph Dias)
12. Contextualized Reading: A Conference Simulation (Joseph Dias)
13. A Poster Session (Gregory Strong)
14. Encouraging Critical Reading (Tamiko Hanaoka)
15. Student Presentations (Gregory Strong)
16. Films and Visual Media Translation (Junichi Miyazawa)
17. Interpreting a Script (Todd Rucynski)

Figure 3: The 17 chapters appearing in the menu of the reading DVD, which was distributed to all teachers in the department upon completion.

Although it is beyond the scope of this report to go into detail about all the content that came to be included on the DVD, it should be apparent by perusing the DVD chapter titles in Figure 3 that efforts were made to introduce pedagogy that allowed for more interaction among students, greater use of the Internet and apps for mobile devices, a multimodal approach to vocabulary study, and a

more task-based approach that would stimulate an active attitude toward learning.

Perhaps the best by-product of the DVD project was the fact that teachers whose teaching practices had never previously been observed or commended were able to have a forum from which they could share their best ideas. They were given the choice to explain their tasks, activities, or techniques in Japanese or English. The filmmaker, Todd Rucynski, tirelessly coaxed teacher-actors through take after take in order to produce a final product that would be both informative and enjoyable for the viewer to watch. In parts, paraphrases of the speaker's words, or simply key phrases, were projected on the screen to aid comprehension.

After the DVD was completed (a process that took nearly half a year), copies were burned for all the teachers in the department. Scenes from it were shown at the annual teachers' orientation as well. Six months after its debut, a follow-up survey was given to all teachers who received it. Twenty-three out of 50-some teachers who we believed to have received the DVD responded to the survey. A somewhat disappointing discovery was that a fifth of the respondents claimed never to have received the DVD. Of those who not only remembered receiving it, but also *watched* it...

- 94% (15 teachers) thought the DVD was a valuable way to get information on ways to teach reading.
- Although only four teachers had actually tried out the suggestions given on the DVD in their own classes, eleven others felt inspired enough to try to do so in the future.

All but one of the teachers surveyed said that they would be interested in additional in-house DVDs on the teaching of other language skills, with one of them writing:

“I find the DVDs an excellent way of providing information and while I enjoyed the teachers' meeting at the start of the school year, it is very convenient to be able to review material later on.”

Perhaps the project was most beneficial for those Japanese teachers who actually starred in the video segments. Even though it was nerve-racking for some—particularly those who presented in English—they found it to be an opportunity for growth and enjoyed the challenge, as these two comments

demonstrate:

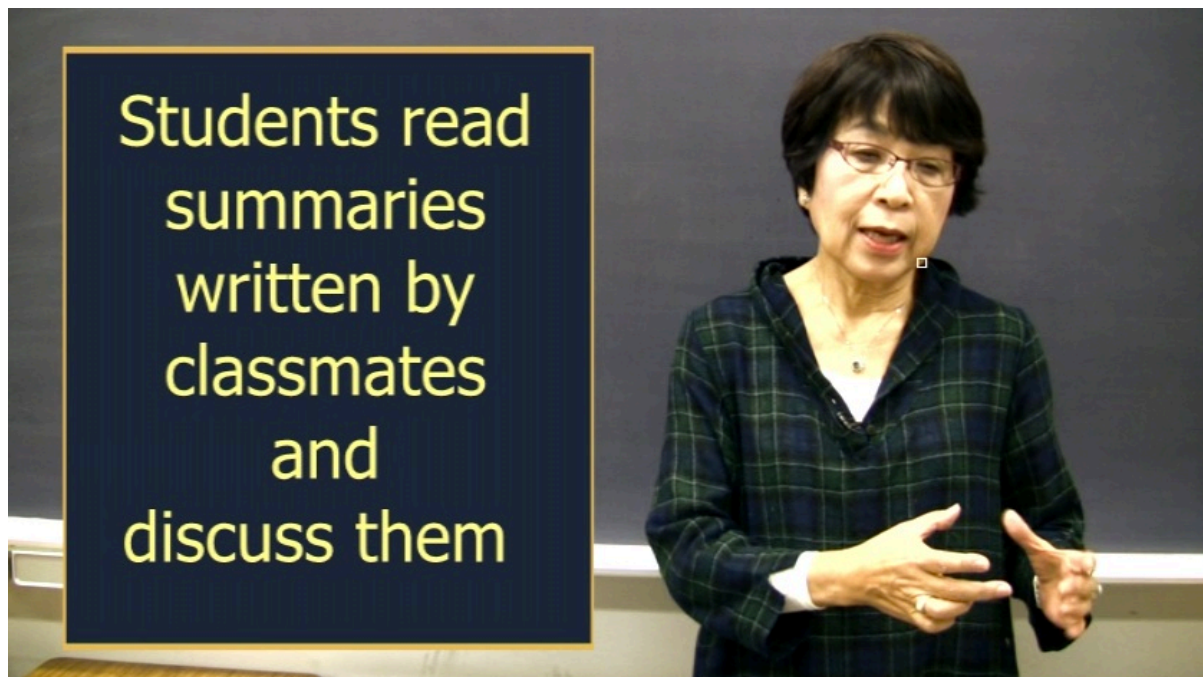
- It was fun. Some teachers gave me feedback and I felt happy to share my ideas with them.
- Personally, I have never wished to attract attention from other teachers. However, I think teachers should not close the doors of their classrooms.
- Valuable experience. I should have developed more effective presentation skills.

The teacher-actors also were very clear about what they hoped the audience would take away from their video presentations. These included:

- That peer teaching is very effective to make students more active and they can learn a lot from each other.
- I hope they will recognize that reading ability can be improved in many different ways. I know my way is very “manual,” yet it can touch some students’ heartstrings, even though they just try to “think.”
- The importance of critical thinking.

In conclusion, although there was some disappointment that fewer than half of the teachers receiving the DVD actually took the time to watch it, the benefits for the teachers involved in its production more than compensated for that. It is also hoped that the DVD will serve the same purpose as a resource book and be brought out when the need for it arises, resulting in more teachers to derive inspiration from it.





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