

# Developing Reading Competence in Japanese University EFL Classes

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## Introduction

EFL reading classes are perhaps the most popular classes in Japanese universities and many universities consider reading as a fundamental component of students' language development. However, in many classes, Japanese college instructors use a teacher-centered, grammar-translation technique. They focus on word-for-word translation, and students' success is measured by how accurately they can translate from English into Japanese. Dubin and Bycina point out that such an approach has certain disadvantages, since it emphasizes vocabulary knowledge and tends to ignore "the spoken characteristics and communicative purposes of language" (1991: 195).

Furthermore, Ohta (1996) says that Japanese students' low English proficiency is mainly due to the use of the grammar-translation method. According to his studies, Japanese test-takers' average TOEFL scores have not improved for the last thirty years. In the reading section of TOEIC and TOEFL, many Japanese fail to complete the test due to their slow reading speed.

In order for Japanese college students to develop EFL reading competence, one method, such as grammar-translation, is inadequate. We may need to consider the learner's process of reading, anxiety, self-confidence, motivation, attitudes, interests, and proficiency, as well as different strategies to enhance his or her competence. The purpose of this paper is to show how Japanese college students can become successful EFL readers when teachers take account of the above-mentioned characteristics and implement different strategies in the appropriate reading context.

## Models of the Process of Reading

Before getting into different strategies for reading, it is important to know the process of reading. In other words, what is happening in the visual system

and the brain while we are reading? In order to answer this question, scholars have developed the following three models.

#### **The Bottom-Up Model**

1. Eyes look
2. Letters identified and "sounded out"
3. Words recognized
4. Words allocated to grammatical class and sentence structure
5. Sentences give meaning
6. Meaning leads to thinking

(Davies 1995 : 58)

According to Davies (1995), the process of reading begins with the conversion of letters to sounds and then proceeds to conversion of sentences to meaning and thinking. In the bottom-up model, this process reflects on the teaching of reading. Dubin and Bycina (1991) indicate that the aim of instruction is to build up learners' decoding abilities from the smallest units such as single letters to words and phrases. They further state that in this model writing is an active and reading a passive activity.

#### **The Top-Down Model**

1. Eyes look
2. Thinking-predictions about meaning
3. Sample sentence as a whole to check meaning
4. To check further, look at words
5. If still uncertain study letters
6. Back to meaning predictions

(Davies 1995 : 58)

Contrary to the bottom-up model, the top-down model focuses on thinking and meaning at the beginning and proceeds to predictions about much smaller units such as sentences to words and letters (Davies 1995). In this model, the role of readers is very active because they predict as they read and go through large chunks of a passage at one time (Dubin & Bycina, 1991). Readers' predictions usually come from their past experience, background knowledge, and knowledge of their target language (Dubin & Bycina, 1991 ; Brown, 1994).

Second-language reading experts advocated this model and as a result, many materials adopted various strategies of the top-down reading model. For example, materials included guessing the meaning from the context, previewing a passage in order to grasp the overall theme, reading for main ideas and

reading in details to find the supporting evidence (Dubin & Bycina, 1991).

### **The Interactive Model**

During the 1980s, the interactive model, a combination of bottom-up and top-down, was developed (Perfetti, 1985 ; Stanovich, 1980). Dubin and Bycina state that “interactive theory acknowledges the role of previous knowledge and prediction but, at the same time, reaffirms the importance of rapid and accurate processing of the actual words of the text” (1991 : 197).

Thus, the interactive model requires both bottom-up and top-down processes according to the purpose of the reader. For example, one may read rapidly for main ideas as well as scan for specific information or proof material after writing a composition (Dubin & Bycina, 1991).

### **Affective Aspects of Reading**

The reading processes mentioned above can be greatly influenced by affective factors such as anxiety, self-confidence, motivation and attitude (Cooper, 1984 ; Mathewson, 1976, 1985 ; Ruddell, 1974 ; Ruddell & Speaker, 1985). Anxiety deriving from having to read aloud or having to read difficult material could be detrimental to comprehension because anxiety may hinder the implementation of goals (Posner & Snyder, 1975). In a second language situation, Swain and Burnaby (1976) found a negative correlation between anxiety and reading test scores among French immersion students in Canada. Meanwhile, Bernhardt (1983) found that when college students studying intermediate German read passages aloud, their comprehension level significantly dropped compared with their silent reading performance.

Another affective factor, self-confidence, is important in effective reading as it affects readers' willingness to take chances. Fluency in reading necessitates some kind of risk, such as predicting and comprehending implicit information from a text. Readers often need to make inferences based on their background knowledge and what they have gathered from the context (Phillips, 1984). Kern states that since L2 readers do not usually feel comfortable about the L2 code, the L2 culture, and L2 text conventions, they are not willing to make inferences. Rather, they tend to take a “safe” route, getting meaning in a word-by-word manner. He says, “a low level of self-confidence may therefore limit not only the goals that readers set (i.e., literal comprehension only) but also the way in which they approach L2 texts (i.e., primarily bottom-up processing)” (Kern 1992 : 312).

Motivation is a significant factor for readers in setting goals and purposes. If the content of the material matches readers' attitudes, beliefs, values and motives, they will have a better attitude, and will pay more attention to the content; and thereby their comprehension will be enhanced. On the other hand, if the attitudes, beliefs, values, and motives expressed in the content do not match the readers', readers may have a negative attitude toward reading and their attention and comprehension will deteriorate (Kern, 1992).

With regard to attitudes in the SL classroom environment, Day (1998) states that good experiences with the teacher, classmates, materials, activities, tasks, procedures, and so on will encourage positive attitudes in reading, whereas unfavorable experiences may result in negative attitudes.

### **Students' Proficiency Level**

In order to design a reading course, we must take students' proficiency level into consideration. According to Aebersold and Field (1997), when students can comprehend a text well enough to get the message adequately, that text is within their own proficiency level. This means they may not understand all the facts and details, but they can comprehend the overall message, main ideas, and some details.

When students attempt to read material beyond their level, they are overwhelmed. When they encounter unknown vocabulary many times in the material that they are reading, they are frustrated. If the structures of sentences are long and complex, they may get either lost or tired or both. If the topic deals with subjects outside their experience or knowledge, they are thrown into an unknown world. When students encounter these situations, they are more likely to stop reading because they cannot understand enough to satisfy their expectations, needs, or interests (Aebersold & Field, 1997).

### **Developing Reading Competence at Konan University**

How can we accommodate the aforementioned needs in reading classes and find out if students actually develop their competence? In order to answer this question, I would like to report on one reading class I was assigned to teach last year at my university.

In 1998, Konan University created five special introductory reading classes for freshman English majors. The main purpose of these classes is to develop students' reading competence so that they would be better able to move on to

their upper-level classes in literature and linguistics. Each class consists of 30 to 35 students, and 90-minute instruction was offered weekly for one academic year (25 to 30 weeks).

## Goals

I set three main goals for this introductory reading class, as follows :  
Students would be able to develop their reading competence by :

1. learning different reading strategies to implement and enhance their reading comprehension
2. increasing their reading speed above 200 w.p.m.
3. developing their thinking skills in English.

The first goal was based on the fact that many Japanese students are accustomed to bottom-up processing of reading : translating word-for-word and occasionally looking up lexical items for meaning. Since they fail to take full advantage of top-down processing such as predicting, and using background knowledge, learning different strategies would enable them to read more efficiently in the target language. Cohen (1990) says, "Skillful reading can accelerate language learning" (1990 : 74).

Concerning the second goal of speed reading, Eskey (1986) has pointed out that if second language learners wish to improve their reading in English, they must read faster. According to Torigai (1996), Japanese EFL adult learners' average reading speed is about 80 w.p.m., whereas American college graduates' average reading speed is approximately 300 to 350 w.p.m. Ohta (1996) says that in order to finish the TOEIC test comfortably, one should read at least 200 w.p.m. For freshman students, 200 w.p.m. might be challenging ; however, it was assumed that this rate of speed reading was attainable, and students would feel a sense of accomplishment if they achieved this goal.

As for the third goal, many students tend to translate as they read in English and have difficulty comprehending without translation. My goal therefore was that, through thinking skill tasks, students would learn to interpret the context in English.

## Materials

In this introductory class, *Reading Power* and *Mini-World '98* were used as the main texts and *Reader's Digest* and TOEFL reading tests were used for supplementary material. *Reading Power* focuses on various reading comprehen-

sion skills such as skimming, scanning, guessing difficult vocabulary in context, and making inferences, and it directs students attention to reading processes. Once learners become conscious of the processes, they can monitor their comprehension and apply appropriate skills as needed for understanding the context.

*Mini-World '98* consists of twenty short articles on current topics, aimed at Japanese adult learners. Articles cover world affairs, regional reports from various countries, celebrities, health, and so on. The text is written in simple English.

### **Teaching Procedures and Students' Requirements**

In each class students are supposed to work on three things: 1) reading skill 2) timed reading 3) thinking skill. To improve reading skills, students work on one of the reading skills without using a dictionary. For example, in a scanning skill, students look at a newspaper story and answer questions such as, "Where was the train when it derailed?" "What could have caused this accident?" Students also scan a table of contents, a timetable, an index, classified ads and so on to become familiar with scanning. The purpose of this skill is to train students to skip over unimportant words and look for specific information as quickly as they can.

In a timed reading, students read two 200 to 400-word passages and answer comprehension questions. Then they record the number of correct answers and their time in their reading progress chart in the back of the book.

As for the thinking skill exercises, students read several short paragraphs that are missing their endings. Then they choose the best answer from multiple choices. If they encounter any new words, they need to guess the meaning in the context.

In the second half of the semester, I used the reading section of the TOEFL reading since it requires various reading skills such as skimming, scanning, guessing vocabulary in context, and understanding main ideas.

In addition to the above three tasks, students are required to read *Mini-World '98* and the book section of *Reader's Digest* outside of the class. In *Mini-World '98*, students take a quiz after reading a couple of articles with a total of five quizzes per semester (total of ten per year). Each quiz consists of questions from the *Reading Power* and comprehension essay-type and multiple choice questions from *Mini-World '98*. Students also write a two- to three-page English summary report after reading a nonfiction story of about twenty-five

pages in *Reader's Digest* twice a semester (four times a year). The main purpose of the assignments from *Mini-World '98* and *Reader's Digest* is to help students understand the main points of the information an author is presenting. Although *Reader's Digest* is authentic and challenging for my students, I chose articles that were relatively easy compared with other authentic reading materials. It was hoped that by reading this authentic material, students would build confidence and develop positive attitudes toward reading.

### **Student Surveys**

At the end of the year, a survey was administered to see whether the class met the needs of the students and whether they felt that they had developed their reading competence. Twenty-seven students participated in this survey and the questions pertained to the following: the level of the difficulty of the reading class, usefulness for improving their reading, reaction to textbooks, the pace of the class, suggestions for other types of reading exercises, the progress of the timed-reading, the system of evaluating the class, comments about quizzes and reports, and any other comments and suggestions.

### **Results and Discussion**

Overall, the survey results were very positive and students seemed to be satisfied with the class and to have developed their competence. Most students (n=17, 62.9%) felt that the level of the class was just right and some students (n=6, 22.2%) thought the class was a little difficult. A couple of students who responded "just right" said that they thought the class was rather easy at the beginning, but it gradually got a little difficult. Those who responded "a little difficult" said the following: "The last unit of skimming exercises was difficult." "Because I'm not good at listening, sometimes I didn't understand what my teacher said in English." "The second semester was more difficult than the first semester, but what I have studied was all useful." Judging from their responses and comments, the level of the class was quite appropriate and didn't cause any anxiety among the students.

The second question was concerning whether the class was useful for students in improving their reading. One third of the students (33.3%) said "very useful" and 66.6% of the students said "pretty useful." Some representative comments are: "I was able to improve my reading speed and felt much confidence in reading." "It must be perfect if the class meets twice a week, but

it'll be quite tough." "I was able to guess difficult vocabulary in the context." "I've never read in English so much." "Reading faster (timed-reading) and reading assignments for reports were useful." According to their comments, many students seemed to feel that timed-reading was the most useful exercise in the class. The reason was probably that they wrote their time in the chart and could see the progress every week.

Concerning *Reading Power* and *Mini-World '98* textbook, many students thought *Reading Power* was very good (n=15, 55.5%) or pretty good (n=12, 44.4%). Some students mentioned that there were a variety of exercises in the text and they were useful and interesting. One student said, "I could see different aspects of reading skills." It seemed that the choice of the text was appropriate to their level and useful to them. In *Mini-World '98*, the majority of students (n=23, 85.2%) thought the content was up-to-date, interesting and not difficult to read.

With regard to the pace of the class, many students (n=19, 70.4%) considered it was just right and some students (n=7, 25.9%) responded that the pace was a little too fast. Those who answered "just right" said the following: "I thought the pace was fast at the beginning, but I got used to it." "Well-organized and the time was spent efficiently." "The class was beneficial and no time to fall asleep." "This is the only class I had motivation to study. Also the class was tough (in a good sense) just like my high school days." Those who responded "a little too fast" said: "It was fast for my level, but I could always keep on my toes." "Sometimes I couldn't do the exercises within the amount of time the teacher set." "Occasionally, I couldn't adjust myself to move on to the next exercise." "No time to rest." For most of the students, the pace of the class was appropriate and efficient; however, for some students, it was difficult to keep up with the pace.

In response to the question, "Are there any other types of exercises you would like to have been included in the class?", not many students wrote down anything. A couple of students mentioned vocabulary building exercises; one student wanted to read a wider variety of articles related to economics, education and space science; one student desired to work on TOEIC-related reading exercises, not only TOEFL reading; and one student said the material covered was sufficient.

Concerning the development of students' reading speed, their average at the beginning of the year was 128 w.p.m. (range=57 to 220) and 257 w.p.m. (range=190 to 400) at the end of the year. This means the rate of their reading speed doubled. Although I did not administer a pre- and post-reading test to

see how much they have gained in their reading proficiency, Kitao (1995) tested a number of college students and concluded that students with higher scores can read faster than students with lower scores. In a more recent study, Graham and Johnson (1999) delivered rapid reading instruction over 12 weeks at ESL classes, and low-intermediate students increased their fluency significantly. These studies showed that there is a strong correlation between learners' reading speed and their reading competence.

In response to the question, "Do you think my system of evaluating your class performance on attendance, quizzes, reports, and other assignments is fair?" the majority of students (n=24, 88.9%) said "Yes" and most of them who made comments indicated that this system was good because students were evaluated according to how much effort they put forth. Also some students pointed out that they preferred to have quizzes and reports for evaluation rather than two big exams (mid-term and finals) alone.

In comments about quizzes and reports, students' representative responses are as follows: "Quizzes and reports were tough, but they were beneficial." "It took me a long time to summarize a report." "I wanted to know how much I got for quizzes." "I wanted to have my quiz back." "It was tough to read a long story for a report." "I'm very satisfied with a report summary assignment." Even though many students felt the reports and quizzes were tough, they had very positive attitudes about them since they could improve their reading. As for returning their quizzes, I did not return them, but starting this year, I have returned each quiz to my students.

Among various other comments and suggestions, students wrote: "I'm very satisfied with this class." "I'm very grateful that I've improved my reading." "Because I'm planning on studying abroad, TOEFL exercises were beneficial." "Almost everyone said this class is quite tough, but I'm very happy that I could improve my reading." "I felt a sense of accomplishment in this class." "Your teaching syllabus was useful." "I was worried at first whether I could keep up with this class, but I got used to this class and thought 'fun.'" "Things you taught me were all useful and I have improved my reading." "As you see my reading speed (beginning of the year: 57 w.p.m. at the end of the year: 229 w.p.m.), I felt how much I've improved my reading in this class." "It was good to learn different approaches of reading. Also the medium of instruction in English was good." "I've improved my English as I've studied more than any other class." "In my fourth report I've realized how much I could read faster and finished up my report effectively." "Summarizing a report was very difficult, but it was a rewarding experience." Overall students' comments were

very positive and they felt they had improved their reading.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to show how Japanese college students can become successful EFL readers by taking account of the different characteristics of readers and implementing different strategies in the appropriate reading text. The survey showed that students had positive experiences learning different strategies of reading from the appropriate material and especially they felt significant gains in their reading speed. This improvement of their reading speed seemed to build their self-confidence in readings as they made positive comments about their reading improvement. In addition, the combination of the simplified text of *Mini-World '98* and *Reader's Digest* seemed to work well. None of the students were overwhelmed by the difficulty of the authentic material, but they felt it quite tough to read a book section (about 25 pages) of *Reader's Digest*.

Although my survey garnered good feedback, I am not very sure how much students have gained in their reading proficiency, apart from speed. Probably the pre- and post-test were helpful to see exactly how much students have improved their reading. In addition, in order to help students become more proficient, I feel the students should read more. The total of one hundred pages of reading assignments for four reports (25 pages for each report) was not sufficient. Mason (1997) did experiments on extensive reading (1,000 pages in simplified English) among Japanese college students and they made significant gains in their reading proficiency. Day also says, "an extensive reading approach seems to be effective in a wide variety of circumstances and with different types of students." (1998 : 35) I believe that a combination of teaching various reading strategies and assigning extensive reading would be the most beneficial to students, and I would like to incorporate this aspect in the near future.

There are probably many different approaches to teach reading classes ; however, compared with word-for-word reading translation class, students in my class seemed to develop their competence in reading, build their self-confidence and motivation, and have positive learning experiences.

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