

日本における短期大学生の英語の読解力向上

Nurturing Higher Levels of ESL Reading Comprehension in Japanese Junior College Students

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The need to be able to cope with reading literature written in English, in today's increasingly internationalized society has put much of the reading material used in Japanese schools and colleges under serious scrutiny. The materials and methods presently used for developing reading comprehension do very little to enable students to deal with future encounters with English in the workplace and even less in developing their ability to appreciate literature.

It has been argued by Rosenblatt (1978), Widdowson (1979), and others that successful reading is an act of creation: the reader creates meaning through the interaction with a text. In this view, the meaning of a text does not reside in a fixed, static form frozen within the words on the page. Rather, it emerges anew in each encounter of a reader with a text. Therefore, a text does not contain meaning as such but, as Widdowson suggests, potential for meaning, which readers, both native and non-native, will realize in varying degrees. This ability to create meaning (what is usually referred to as comprehension) depends critically on, and in fact

may be said to presuppose, another kind of interaction — that of various types of information the reader brings to the reading task and information available in the text itself¹. Unfortunately, the education system provides very little time or opportunity for students to explore all that literature has to offer. Instead they are subjected to batteries of comprehension exercises in preparation for various crucial examinations. Although the education system remains in a semi-state of flux, the relationship between the Ministry of Education, teachers and educationists in many ways remains reminiscent of the 1930's when Harold E. Palmer was Director of IRET, in Japan.¹

Recent work in the production of a new high school English textbook has re-enforced my belief that this situation is unlikely to improve in the near future. Therefore, ways of developing the more mundane reading materials and strategies that students had become accustomed to within the tertiary educational system, were needed if students were going to be cognizant with all that literature has to offer.

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The strategies outlined in this paper are based on those presented by Merritt for use with native speakers and this paper will entail a brief examination of what is involved in achieving an adequate level of comprehensionⁿ. An assessment of the contribution of typical comprehension exercises, and the consideration of alternative strategies for developing reading comprehension to a point where students can select and evaluate material for themselves. Those strategies mentioned here plus others having already been incorporated in a reading course at Kyoiei Gakuen Junior College. The difficulties encountered in tailoring these strategies for use with second year college students and their effectiveness will be dealt with in later papers.

FUNCTIONAL READING

Essentially functional reading is a selective process in which we skim, scan, or study intensively those parts of a text which will enable us to satisfy a previously defined reading purpose. This purpose will be related to an everyday need of greater or lesser importance. Cognition, therefore, will be related to the priority of purpose, and with it the importance of relating everything that is read to previous knowledge and experience. Which will involve:

identifying significant detail (noting omissions, discriminating between explicit statement and inference, and distinguishing between fact and opinion);

reorganising information in accordance with the initiating purpose (rather than being dominated by the structure of the text);

using relevant criteria in evaluating facts, opinions, and arguments (checking against

other evidence, the judgements of others whose opinions are valued, and checking the internal logic of the argument);

assimilating and accommodating (adding to the knowledge organised within previously accepted categories, modifying existing knowledge and existing categories where necessary, and achieving syntheses that may lead to decisive changes in attitudes or behaviour).⁷

To achieve this students will need to be trained in a number of skills to facilitate their negotiation of certain receptive skills. These skills being divided into type 1 and type 2 skills.^m Type 1 skills can be divided into three categories; predictive skills (lead in), extracting specific information (scanning), getting the gist (skimming). These skills are those that students perform on a text when they attempt it for the first time and precede type 2 skills. Type 2 skills are generally concerned with more detailed analysis and are generally categorised as; the extraction of detailed information, recognising function and discourse patterns and deducing meaning from context.

Is all of this achieved by the typical comprehension exercise found in many texts? The following example will give some idea of how much many students achieve by studying:

The ximps were smonkin vapely in the iikl ee. Some ximps were brup but the other ximps were purb. They were all zx and rather veher so they did not uma the noru.

1. What were the ximps doing?
2. How were they smonkin?
3. Where were they smonkin?
4. In what way were the ximps the same?
5. In what way were they different?
6. Why did the ximps not uma the noru?

In this example, students are presented with texts which make just as little sense to them, as it does to you, but they can still answer the questions. The words of an ordinary comprehension test may be more familiar to them, because they may have heard them regularly, but they may have as little genuine understanding of these words as you, the reader, have of those in the above text, even though you can answer each of the questions set.

Students learn how to move the words around in exercises of this kind and with practice can soon write answers to examination questions. Anyone with a few texts such as the above, and plenty of practice on "comprehension" questions such as the above, would have little difficulty in writing an interesting essay on the attributes and behaviour of the xinp.³ With these possibilities in mind, it takes only a brief study of typical questions and answers to Japanese examination questions to realise just how shallow is the comprehension that students achieve — even though considerable intelligence is often used in achieving these low levels of comprehension. A fact born out when a similar test to the one above was given to a group of university students and a group of Kyohei Gakuen junior college students. While the university students scored higher than the junior college students both groups admitted to having no idea as to the meaning of the passage.^{iv}

Other disadvantages of comprehension exercises are that they are usually of the multiple choice type, i.e., a number of alternatives are provided and the student has to tick or underline the correct answer. Of which many can be answered correctly without even looking at the text, therefore, the comprehension

task is fundamentally different from most normal reading because of the limited possible range of answers.

These objections are as much a criticism of many comprehension tests, as they are of comprehension exercises. As a means of developing comprehension, however, a further objection is that they are simply exercises, and nothing more. They give the student no direct help in developing those comprehension processes referred to earlier. They can be highly effective—at a superficial level, for students to acquire the skills necessary for succeeding in so called "comprehension" tests.

But every time a student opens a book and reads merely what he or she is told or reads to answer questions set by someone else, they are merely being trained to process words at the minimal depth that will ensure approbation, or avoidance of censure. Those mindless learning routines that ask for no more than this are the most fundamental barriers to the development of reading comprehension.⁴

REPAIR STRATEGIES

We should give serious consideration to many strategies if we wish to facilitate students development, rather than provide the educational equivalent of an obstacle course in which the obstacles bear little relation to those of real life. Among those worth considering are:

A Negotiated Curriculum

To design curriculum situations in which the student defines his or her own purposes, and reads to achieve an outcome that satisfies these clearly defined purposes is the paramount strategy. The outcome must then be

evaluated by the student in terms of these purposes – not the possibly irrelevant or even inconsequential purposes of the author of the textbook. The student should also be encouraged to make full use of the outcome thus achieved and learn, in doing so, the value of effective reading.

An extra emphasis on the negotiated curriculum, v which is what this strategy amounts to, requires more carefully planned teaching – not less. There can be no place in such a curriculum for sloppy, laissez-faire attitudes, in which students are expected to develop a sure sense of priorities without guidance. If there is so much debate among educationists about educational priorities there is little justification for expecting more from students than we can produce ourselves. The teacher does not, therefore, abdicate from his responsibilities in a negotiated curriculum, or seek refuge from reality by claiming that his role is non-prescriptive. Education is prescriptive in principle – it is whatever the educationist defines as worthwhile. It is also prescriptive in practice, for students are not set free to do anything they like as the fancy takes them.

What is prescribed by any responsible educationist is the organisation of a curriculum which satisfies the carefully thought-through objectives of the teacher, the course or college. What is advocated in the negotiated curriculum is the continuous engagement of the students themselves in curriculum decision making. For this to work, they need starting points that make immediate sense to them, which produce outcomes which are high on their own list of immediate priorities, but which also happen to lead towards the development of values which are consistent with their own long-term interests. To set the de-

velopment of reading comprehension in any lesser context is to settle for the dross of immediate convenience, rather than the excellence of educational necessity.⁵

In the following strategies to be described, students produce materials for developing their own learning. The next strategy is concerned with the development of comprehension of individual words, and the latter with the understanding of texts.

Cloze Concept

Deleting some of the words in a text so that meanings have to be inferred is one way of encouraging students to extract more meaning from the cues available in a text. Some care needs to be taken as some kinds of deletion make minimal demands on the reader. Note the differing demands in the following texts:

- a. It was a _____ .
- b. She rode on the _____ .
- c. The _____ rode majestically into the castle, his armour coloured _____ by the setting sun.

Example a, without additional context, allows a wide range of possibilities and provides little to work on apart from the syntactic structure which indicates a noun.^{vi} In example b, the noun is obviously a word which means 'able to be rode upon', but the possibilities are still fairly wide. In example c, the reader has to use backward acting cues for the first deletion. 'Rode majestically' suggests a King or a knight. Even with the addition of 'armour', however, the reader can rely upon little more than association and it is not possible to draw any firm conclusions

about the rider without additional clues. In the second deletion however, the reader may feel that an inference can be made about the colour of 'the setting sun' and conclude that the armour was red.

The provision of texts with deletions which can be solved by a thoughtful scrutiny of all the clues available in the text seems to offer a promising means of developing word comprehension.⁶ Especially if the assumption is made that, in a cloze test, a response which is totally syntactically and semantically acceptable indicates that the student has understood what he or she has read. Responses that are not acceptable will provide the teacher with evidence about the processes used by the student in responding. It should also be assumed that the more competent student will use larger pieces of text while filling a cloze test blank than will a less able student, and that more competent students will rely on semantic cues rather than syntactic cues.⁷ Bearing in mind the importance of a previously defined reading purpose, we must accept that setting cloze texts as exercises may be of as little value as setting any other kind of exercise.⁸

In view of this, the best way of using cloze type texts is to have suitable texts available for use as and when they are needed. Suppose, for example, we intend to cover a particular set of concepts at some stage, cloze texts are prepared in advance so that any students having difficulty in understanding a particular concept can be referred to the relevant section of the cloze workshop. This saves teaching a whole class what only some of the students may need, or spending an excessive amount of time with any one student.

There is much to be gained by getting students to work in pairs on clozed texts.

Each student will tend to spot different clues and the resulting debate is likely to be much more educational than the practice of working alone. First, however, we need to work through a number of texts with small groups so that the students learn how to approach the text. By discussing the various clues that can be used we can provide students with direct help in developing comprehension skills.⁹

Merritt suggests that the construction of cloze workshops can be a shared responsibility. The more advanced students can be encouraged to select texts, assess their readability, where necessary, for less able students. Such an exercise provides useful opportunities for revision. Even more important, however, is the extent to which it reveals whether the more advanced student really understands a concept. And in studying a text in order to decide what words to delete, the student can make further strides in learning about the clues that need to be used to achieve the fullest possible comprehension of a particular word or phrase. This understanding is further developed if the more advanced student has to construct a simplified text which contains all the relevant clues. This will often help the more advanced student to see any defects in the original exposition and engage in further reading. Thus, good reading teaching is good subject teaching. This is perhaps a reasonable enough methodological goal considering the circumstances, but adopting this particular method for use in the Japanese ESL classroom will require either substantial alteration or student training.

Prediction and Diagrammatic Models

An examination of the nature of reading out

comes, i.e., the process of assimilation and accommodation, and any resultant changes in attitudes and/or behaviour, leads to the next strategy.

If we really comprehend what we read, then what we assimilate or accommodate is not the actual words. We do not comprehend by remembering a text as it is or a rearrangement of the words in the text or even a verbal summary. If you ask someone to tell you today about something they have read and understood they usually use words, and a descriptive sequence, that bears little relation to the words and descriptive sequence of the original text, and if you ask them the same question next week you may get an equally lucid account of the text but in a very different sequence. Some key words or phrases will tend to recur, but these are labels which elicit deeper understanding of a non-verbal kind.

Suppose for example, you read a description of a person's face, or scene, you may well construct in your imagination, a visual image of some kind. If you read a set of figures you may make sense of these by conceiving of them as a graph. If you read a set of instructions which you cannot carry out immediately you may form in your mind's eye a sequence based on a series of realistic images or a series of symbols. Similarly, historical sequences and relationships may be seen as a tree diagram, a biological classification may be seen as an attributes matrix, or a logic argument as a Venn diagram.⁸

This strategy for developing reading comprehension is then to encourage students to represent their non-verbal understanding by means of a suitable diagram.^{ix} This enables the reader to check each element against the text to see whether anything has been

omitted or added, and to decide whether the structure of the dimensional model is a valid representation of the ideas presented in linear form in the text. How this works can be seen in the following example:

Father and Son

Dr. White of New York works at a center for boys with learning problems. One day a father brought his son to him for testing.

The father told Dr. White about his son. 'The boy is having difficulty in learning and can't even play baseball. My son isn't doing well because he doesn't try. I have done everything for him. I have even shouted at him and punished him. But nothing helps.'

Dr. White tested the boy and then called in his father. He asked the father to sit in front a mirror and gave him a pencil and a piece of paper. There was a star on the paper.

He asked the father to look only in the mirror and follow the lines of the star with the pencil. The father made the same mistakes anyone makes. Every time he moved the pencil, it went the wrong way. The father's face became red. At this point the doctor shouted at him, 'Hurry up! Why are you taking so long? Don't you know left from right?' These words made the father very angry. 'Can't you understand?' the doctor said to him, 'That's how your son feels all the time.'

Suddenly the father understood everything.

He put his face down on the table and began to cry.

(Extract from Access To English, Book one, Kaitakusha, 1993.)

This passage was taken from a current Japanese high school textbook. The corris-

ponding comprehension exercises consisted of a cloze test and the standard type 'Wh' questions. No higher reading comprehension questions or exercises were provided.

Figure 1 is an attempt to represent the information in the passage. A quick glance will tell you that it is impossible to represent the material in the text with out making a number of assumptions which need to be questioned.

This is not necessarily a criticism of this particular text. Books cannot be written to satisfy every reader's specific information needs. What is relevant and the identification of any omissions that are significant for the reader will always remain the readers responsibility.

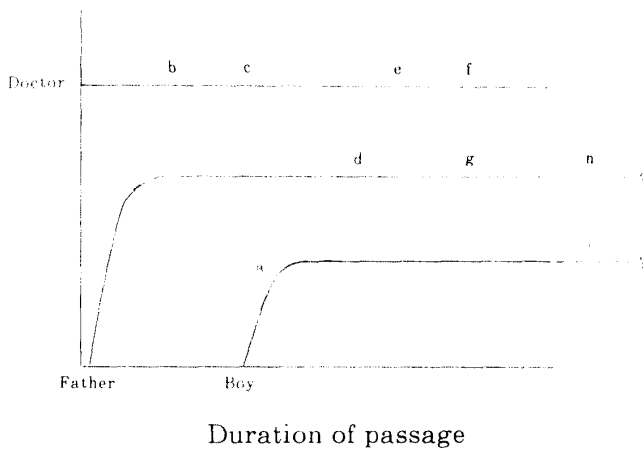


Fig. 1

Figure 1 Linear model of the ideas presented in the text

The questions posed by figure 1 are governed by the readers needs, as shown by the following questions:

- a. What kind of learning problems does the doctor deal with?
- b. Why is being able to play baseball a necessary concern of the boy's father?

- c. What was the fathers goal for his son?
- d. What does the father mean by 'everything'?
- e. What tests did Dr. White give the boy and the boy's father?
- f. Why did Dr. White give a test to the boy's father?
- g. Why did the doctors words make the father angry?
- h. Does the reader understand what it was that the father understood?
- i. Can the reader relate that to the boys experiences?
- j. Does the reader think that the problem has been solved?

A readers ability to comprehend is partly based on asking such questions as these for his or herself. The number of questions that could be asked of any passage can be very large, therefore the reader must be able to formulate and select those questions which are of relevance to his or her needs.

If questions are set for students in advance, this denies them experience in one of the most basic requirements for developing higher levels of comprehension. However, if we encourage students to try and represent a passage in some appropriate way the questions will arise automatically.

Those students having difficulty in representing what they have read, may either mean that they did not really comprehend the passage or they are not sure how to represent the passage.

Those ideas that are represented in some way usually make it much easier to extrapolate the questions from the assumptions made. Modeling also helps students to read what is written, that which can be deduced, and what is inferred, much better.

Students need practice and training in modelling if the results are to be successful, especially when starting from scratch. Teachers can practice this by reading; The Open University (1977b), Abbs and Freebairn (1989) and Scott et al. (1984)

CONCLUSION

The reading strategies in this paper were originally developed for reading in a students mother tongue and there is nothing original about the strategies presented in this paper, other than that they are being developed for use in a second language teaching situation. They represent little more than the natural development of ideas that have been known for a long time. However, in a serious effort to raise the level of reading comprehension, I hope that they can be developed further. Early results indicate that students in this program find some of the strategies a little more challenging and consequently more interesting. Whether or not this course is successful or not, will have to be judged not only by empirical data, but also by how the students ultimately value the course in terms of enjoyment and personal satisfaction, after all, one of the greatest motivations for reading is pleasure.

Notes

I Here I am referring to Harold E. Palmer (1877–1949), who by combining the direct methods of Berlitz with the applied linguistic approach of Sweet and the reform movement to create a solid intellectual and practical foundation for the development of ELT as an autonomous profession, became Linguistic Advisor to the Japanese Ministry of Education in 1922 and who, in

the following year was appointed Director of the Ministry's special Institute for Research in English Teaching (IRET). See Howett 1991.

II See The Open University (1977 a, b) for more detailed variations on these strategies.

III Frequently the terms 'extensive' (i.e. general whole text) and 'intensive' (i.e. detailed) skills are used. The reason for preferring the terms type 1 and type 2 is because in doing so the methodological procedures are emphasised and also much of what has traditionally been called intensive work comes at the first reading, which to some extent, makes it extensive work. (Harmer, J)

IV This has been born out by preliminary results from a study yet to be published.

V Merritt uses this term to refer to a curriculum in which each step in any particular enquiry is taken as a result of negotiation between teacher and students. Either the students identify for themselves the need for each successive step or the teacher justifies any demands he feels compelled to make in terms that ensure wholehearted support from the students. *Studies in Reading* (1979: 145)

VI Even at the level of word recognition, errors of word class are rare in reading aloud. However, deletions based on syntax may be useful, arguably, for developing the appropriateness of response. *Ibid.*: 147

VII See Jongasma (1971), Oller (1979), Hughes (1988), for a review of research relating to cloze as a teaching instrument.

VIII See Merritt (1975), for a more detailed discussion of an approach to teaching students how to extract word meanings from texts. See The Open University

(1977a) for a description of how to construct a cloze workshop. Widdowson. H Exploration in applied linguistics, New York: Oxford. 1979 171-183

IX This idea was developed by Merritt (1975) and in The Open University (1977b). For other variations on the same theme see Abbs and Freebairn (1989) and Scott et al. (1984).

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